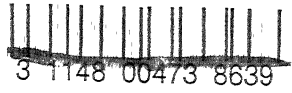


Afghan Interlude

By

OLIVER RUDSTON DE BAER

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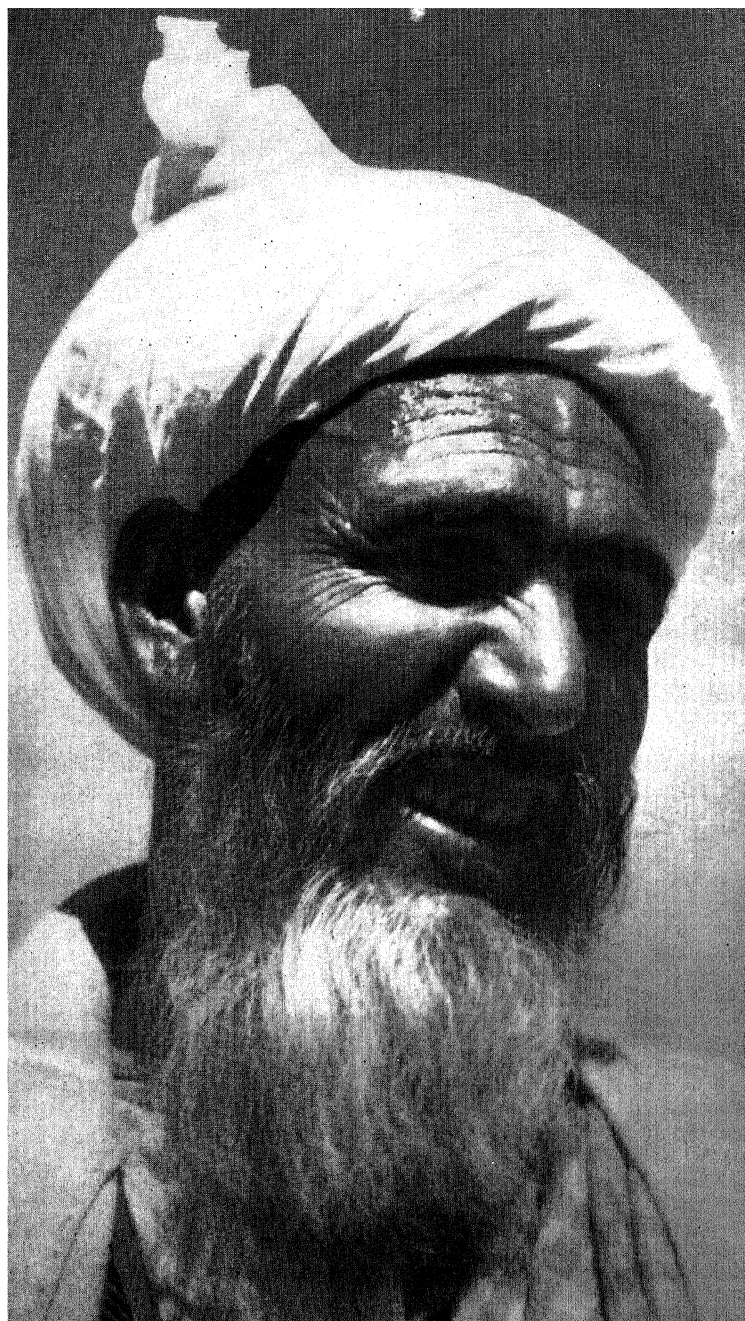
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AFGHAN INTERLUDE

JUN 1964



AFGHAN INTERLUDE



Oliver Rudston de Baer
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TO

An Overdraft at Lloyds Bank, Cambridge, a constant companion who, thank Heaven, no longer exists; without whose assistance our expedition could never have left England; and without whose constant encouragement to provide the funds necessary to secure its decease these Words might never have been written,

AFGHAN INTERLUDE,

an unworthy Tribute, is humbly,
if hardly affectionately

DEDICATED

MANUSCRIPT BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE

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FOREWORD

I KNOW only too well that this book is not what an Afghan would have me write about his country, but I feel that his objections to it would be ill founded if they were based on my presentation of Afghanistan rather than upon the purely literary failings which it has. I have tried to present an accurate picture of Afghanistan as we saw it, whilst at the same time linking the isolated incidents together with an account of our own travels and actions: I have tried to keep these latter to a reasonable minimum. I am aware that I may be held occasionally to have erred in taste in holding the simple—and not-so-simple—people of the Middle East to excessive mockery, people who were, after all, our hosts and who showed us the greatest possible kindness. If this is felt, I can only apologize, adding in my own defence that there is no harm in laughter provided that it is not malicious. The incidents happened, they amused us, and so they were remembered. After all, we ourselves were ridiculed often enough—and again without malice—in every country through which we passed, and we always tried to laugh with the crowd and never at it. Now comes a chance of laughing back, and I can only hope that those who are mocked will mind it as little as we did when it was our turn.

I should like to express our thanks to the forty-five firms which by their generosity enabled our venture to take place. I shall not mention them by name, in order to save them a spate of begging letters, and they are already well aware of our gratitude. Perhaps one word might nevertheless be said of our Land-Rover, which was lent to us by the makers: the vehicle had already completed a run of over 23,000 miles across Africa as part of a testing programme, and it was still able to give us a trouble-free journey in Asia. My narrative will show that the going was not always easy.

I should like to thank the Royal Central Asian Society and the Royal Geographical Society for their support, mentioning in particular the late Colonel H. W. Tobin, D.S.O., O.B.E., for his assistance in the early stages of our planning, and Dr Laurence Lockhart, whose excellent advice was frequently sought. Dr Lockhart was also involved in the production of this book, as he assisted me with some of the historical details, but I hasten to add in his vindication that he bears none of the responsibility for the way in which it has been written.

Lastly, may I thank my friends at Cambridge and elsewhere who have read through parts of the manuscript and have provided many useful suggestions, often steering me back on to the rails when I have erred too far off them; and in particular Christopher Balfour, John Stayt and Richard Thompson. The highest praise that I can give to them is to say that after four months of each other's undiluted company we still occasionally speak to one another.

O. R. DE B.

TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE
April, 1956

Chapter One

PREPARATIONS ·

CAMBRIDGE—or that part of Cambridge which can still be described as a town within a University—lay swathed in the atmosphere of merrymaking which descends upon it like a rash in mid-June, a time which is therefore, and with characteristic logic, called May Week. In Trumpington Street and Trinity Great Court, in All Saints' Passage and on the Backs, undergraduates, penguin-like in their boiled shirts, were to be seen escorting gauzily-clad young women as they strolled about, relaxing and taking the air for a moment before plunging again with reckless abandon into the relentless turmoil of the dance-floors. Noises of gaiety poured forth into the warm night as countless bands ran through their repertoires into the early hours of the morning. Everybody, or nearly everybody, was happy. It was June the Fourteenth, 1955.

In Sidney Street, sand-coloured and ungainly, there stood a car whose utilitarian appearance made it seem badly out of place amongst the other more sober and comfortable vehicles which were parked in an unending ribbon to the front and to the rear of it. It somehow did not seem to be a part of the general merriment. Passers-by turned to stare at it; they made ribald comments; they marked its high, top-heavy rear compartment, prophesying that the weight of luggage on the roof would soon tip it over; they wondered what it was for, hazarding wild guesses amongst themselves. Peeved at the silence of the vehicle, they passed further witty comments, made wittier by alcohol, and went on.

The two dishevelled men standing by this car with a vaguely proprietary air seemed to be doing very little in spite

of an immense amount of activity. Occasional snatches of conversation might be heard :

"Where does this go, on top?"

"No, it's heavy. Inside. No, it can't go inside. OUT-side. On top. No, not there either. Let's leave it on the pavement for the time being."

"I've wound the rope round the spare wheel. It means the bonnet can't open, but the engine's all right for a few months anyway."

"NO, IT ISN'T."

"Oh, very well. On the roof."

The rope was unwound and put on the roof. Within minutes it was back on the pavement, increasing the vast pile of boxes, trunks, tyres, picks, shovels and assorted oddments already there.

"Did you get an inspection light?"

"No, I forgot."

"Oh well. Damn this rail strike."

"Yes, damn the rail strike. *We can't go on loading until we've got the jerry-cans.*"

"No, we can't. *We must have jerry-cans.* We can't do anything until they arrive. Let's sit down."

The two men sat down, one on the coil of rope, the other on a box prominently marked CROSSE AND BLACKWELL'S STEAK AND KIDNEY PUDDING. Their minds were far from the May Dances. They had room for only one thought, which occupied them as water might occupy the mind of a legionnaire on a march in the Sahara. Jerry-cans.

A car drew up in the middle of the street, and a face poked out of the window. Behind the face, the outline of a girl could dimly be made out.

"Hello, John. You fellows just off?"

"Yes."

"That your car?"

"Yes."

"When are you going?"

"*Tomorrow, but we haven't any passports.*"

"I say, you're pushed. HA HA! Don't envy you. I like the automatic in your belt, Oliver."

"*Melodramatic.*"

"Quite, quite. Well, bring me back some scalps, won't you?
HA HA HA HA!"

"These bloody railwaymen."

"Yes, yes. (What's that, Darling? Yes, of course, Darling.)
Oh well, the best of luck. See you next term, perhaps. 'Bye.'"

With a crash of gears the car drew away. The two men remained where they were, muttering to themselves about "abysmal ignorance" and "trades unions".

"This your car, Sir?"

The idiotic question had been asked so many times before that one of the two was about to lose patience and give a tart reply when he noticed that it had been asked by a policeman. Tall, dignified and endowed with the supreme gift for saying the obvious that is the exclusive property of the British constabulary, he had moved up with the ponderous and majestic gait of the *Queen Mary* entering Southampton Harbour.

"Yes, Officer, this is our car."

"You haven't turned your lights on."

"No."

"It's after lighting-up time," the officer continued inexorably.

"Yes."

He pointed to the conclusion.

"You'd better turn them on."

As if to demonstrate the reasonableness of the Law, he added: "It's dark."

The lights were turned on. The Law prepared to move away. It hesitated.

"This stuff on the pavement. Is it yours, too?"

"Yes."

"It's blocking the pavement."

"Yes."

"People can't get by."

"No."

"You'd better move it."

A pile of ammunition was shifted a few inches with a clatter as the policeman moved off. The two men sat down again.

Some time later a faint humming was heard in the distance, rising above the surrounding noise. It rapidly grew to a mighty roar as a black car of formidable vintage tore along the street and squealed to a halt. A face appeared again.

"WE'VE GOT THE JERRY-CANS," it shouted triumphantly.

"Yes, we've got the JERRY-CANS," warbled half a dozen drunken voices inside.

"How about unloading them?"

"Right," said the face, struck by the originality of the suggestion; with a merry chatter of valve-gear the black car reversed a hundred yards. Soon the peace of the warm June evening was further disturbed by a series of deafening crashes as a tuneless chorus struck up.

"Here-we-come-round-with-jerry-cans, jerry-cans, JERRY-CANS,

Here-we-cound-round-with-JERRY-CANS,

On a fine and fro-o-o-o-sty morning."

A teetering procession appeared round the corner, each member of which was carrying two green jerry-cans which had just been fetched from an Army depot.

"Look, we've brought your jerry-cans," said the first member.

"Yes," agreed the second, dropping his load with an ear-splitting sound, "we've brought your jerry-cans." Suited the action to his words, he pointed expressively.

"It's all right now," volunteered a third. "You've got your jerry-cans. We've brought them for you. They're here." And they all trooped off.

It was all right now. The jerry-cans had arrived.

The idea that we should go to Afghanistan for the summer, which had been born some eight months previously, had matured, and was now about to become fact, was really the product of necessity. The University authorities do not require undergraduates to spend more than half their year at Cambridge, leaving the rest of the time for the individual to use as he thinks best. Four months of this leisure comes in summer, a period too short to be spent on serious employment, but far too long to be spent doing nothing. Thus it becomes imperative to find occupation: expeditions were fashionable that year, and it seemed perfectly in order for one to be organized by us.

Our choice of a country, which in many ways did not prove particularly fortunate, also stemmed partly from necessity. To have obtained the necessary backing for a visit to a country comparatively near England—such as Turkey or Morocco—would have been difficult, as we had little specialized knowledge. We considered ourselves adequately equipped to investigate little-known countries, but we were not scientists, and this already limited our scope to unexplored territory. Then there was the question of language, for one cannot begin to understand a people whose language is a totally closed book; my own few words of schoolboy Persian turned our eyes eastward. Lastly, there was the matter of distance.

It is by now almost an axiom that the farther you go and the more impossible your object, the greater will be your chances of securing support from firms, who will sometimes lend or give their products to expeditions. However, four months is not a very long time, and travelling by car—as we intended to do from the first—is a slow business. Thus our object had to be as far away as possible, but not more than a month's travel; unexplored, of geographical and general interest and, if possible, Persian-speaking.

The obvious answer was Afghanistan.

The very name, with its implications of mystery and echoes of the stories of the North-West Frontier, awoke the dormant *wanderlust* in us. Feverishly we got out atlases and bought small-scale maps; finally we graduated to the map-rooms of the University Library and of the Royal Geographical Society, where we gazed fervidly at the great patches of white marked "unexplored" on the large-scale maps. We pored over books and magazines, investigated the works of those great and hardy travellers of old such as Marco Polo, and interrogated travellers who had been in those parts. We were both pleased and disappointed by the results of this: pleased because only a few people seemed to have devoted any time to travelling in Afghanistan, and disappointed because we could find out so little about it. The maps were often completed in freehand and bristled with question-marks: such books as we found were mostly either out of date or very sketchy; whilst the travellers were only too anxious to please, but had little to add to our own very scant knowledge.

"I've never been to Afghanistan," they might say, "but I can give you a very good contact in Karachi"; or "I did pass through Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif once, on my way to Russia. I thought it was awful."

The nearest we got to hearing any first-hand knowledge about the eastern part of the country was from the people who had served on the North-West Frontier. Their information was detailed, accurate and reliable, even if it did concern the wrong area. Books—interminable, dry-as-dust books—on various aspects of the Afghan wars enlightened us further, and an occasional illustrated article would add to our slowly growing picture of the country. We gradually collected an impression of a remote, inaccessible mountain autocracy, very beautiful where it was not desert, still largely unknown to the West, peopled with tribesmen whose ferocity was only matched by their hospitality to strangers, and whose customs

and way of life had remained unchanged for many centuries of turbulent and bloody history.

We were confirmed in our impression that this was the country that we wanted to visit, but the more we learned about it, the more remote and unreachable it seemed; the more unreachable it seemed, the more attractive it became. We brooded over the distances involved, and became depressed. Armed with a firm determination to reach our object, we had some writing paper stamped "The Cambridge Expedition to Afghanistan, 1955" in large black capitals, as a cure for our depression. This, a typewriter and an address (my own lodgings) made us feel very much better, but the distances remained, and we were still all too well aware of how little we had done.

So little had been done, indeed, that we had little idea of exactly where we were going. Afghanistan provides an *embarras de richesses* for the would-be traveller, with some five racial groups, innumerable tribes and every gradation of countryside from desert and plain to snowy mountain peaks. A choice was not going to be easy, but after some discussion we settled on one of the most remote parts of the whole country: the strip of land which was made over to Afghanistan by the Anglo-Russian Boundary Commission in 1893. This piece of territory—the object of whose creation was to avoid the existence of an Anglo-Russian frontier and to keep a permanent buffer between the two empires—is called the Wakhan valley, and is in fact a hundred-and-fifty-mile-long finger of land reaching out over the Pamirs to touch the frontier of Chinese Sinkiang. All reports of the area, from the time of Marco Polo onwards, had shown it to be very beautiful, teeming with game and very fertile, as well as an interesting area because of the way of life of the people, some of whose villages are over ten thousand feet above sea-level.

We approached the Afghan Embassy in London, little realizing that even to apply for a permit to enter Wakhan was enough to prejudice our chances of being allowed to go

anywhere else when, as must happen, the application was refused. As callers at the Embassy, we were received with the greatest courtesy. The Secretary explained that permits were something with which he could not deal. A formal application would be sent to Kabul on our behalf, and "perhaps in a fortnight" we might hear the answer. We would surely be allowed to go where we wanted, but "it takes time," he said.

He meant just that. We had as yet no inkling of the Truth About Permits in Afghanistan. Six months later, in spite of regular calls at fortnightly intervals, no answer had been received to our applications.

* * * *

It was also at the Afghan Embassy that we heard concrete confirmation of what had as yet been only vaguely mooted in the papers: that all was not well between Afghanistan and her neighbour Pakistan.

"You see," the Secretary told me, with an all-embracing gesture of his hands, on one of my visits to him, "Pakistan is so unreasonable. We want to see the Pathan tribesmen who live in Pakistan well established in an independent state of their own. It is the right of every people to have self-determination, and Afghanistan is supporting their every effort to break free of the yoke of Pakistani tyranny and to create the state of Pashtunistan." He fetched a map. "Here is Pashtunistan."

"A very big country," I commented.

This was true: its eastern frontier stretched from Chitral down the line of the Indus, and ended just to the west of Karachi. Consisting entirely of Pakistan territory, it looked bigger than the remainder of the state from which it had been carved.

"And is Afghanistan contributing her Pathan areas to the new state?" I asked.

"No," was the firm answer. "Pathans in Afghanistan are quite satisfied with the present monarchy. They have no wish

for self-determination and are quite content to remain as they are. We in Afghanistan do not want to go to war to destroy Pakistan, in order to secure the independence of Pashtunistan. The Pakistanis are putting pressure on us by cutting off our trade routes through Chaman and the Khyber, but we do not approve of this. We prefer to use peaceful means. . . .”

“Quite.”

It was soon obvious that we were in for a difficult time. Afghans are traditionally suspicious, and particularly so of the English and the Russians. Our goal lay within a few miles of Russia, we were English, and we would also be very near Pakistani Kashmir. It was possible that it might be more prudent to have an alternative plan in the—unlikely, *bien entendu*—case of our having difficulty over Wakhan.

About this time we heard from Colonel Tobin of the Royal Central Asian Society, of The Mountain, a subject which was to be turned into such nonsense by the Press later on. It appeared that in one of the many patches of virgin paper which make up the map of eastern Afghanistan, there was a mountain some 24,000 feet high. The neighbouring Karakoram had been comparatively well surveyed, and a peak of such dimensions could not have been hiding there; but in the unknown regions of the Hindu Kush it was quite possible, and we were asked to look for it, find it and, if possible, measure it. Basing our second plan on this, we chose an alternative area in Nuristan, resolving, if this too should be forbidden, to go to Badakhshan, the North-Eastern province.

At any rate, even if we did not know exactly where we were going, we did know what we were going to do when we got there. Our first object was to compile a regional survey of an unknown area in Afghanistan: this was to include customs, land utilization, irrigation, farming methods and inheritance systems, all with a view to suggesting improvements where applicable and where practicable—as we found out, many techniques which could be described technically as improvements would, if applied to our area, lead only to

economic chaos. Then, and possibly even more important, we were to find out as much as possible about the nomads who exist in every part of Afghanistan, taking photographs where this could be done without offence to any one, and following them on that part of their yearly migration which we should witness. This task assumed its importance from the fact that the Afghan Government has plans for settling the nomads on the land, and their days are therefore numbered. As very little was known about these people, we might have done well to restrict ourselves to a study of them alone, but as the Government might view with suspicion any foreigners living with such a powerful and unruly faction, we felt that it would be for the best to leave them as an incidental—albeit a large one. Then there were the routine tasks which almost any expedition is asked to carry out—the collection of representative insects, botanical and geological specimens and of soil samples for analysis. Altogether, we hoped to be able to work for between one and two months if all went well, leaving a few weeks free for looking for our mountain.

By this time, we had decided on our composition. Christopher Balfour, who had been one of the first to think up the plan and had carried a large part of the burden of organization, was to be the botanist, entomologist, mechanic and treasurer. He fulfilled all these appointments with imperturbable urbanity, rarely fussed and never worried. John Stayt supplied the detailed geographical knowledge required for writing a thesis on the area we eventually visited; he could also have done the same for mountaineering, had we gone near any mountains worthy of the name. Richard Thompson was our photographer-in-chief, whilst I myself was to provide a knowledge of Persian, as well as some experience of dealing with Oriental bureaucracies.

We had also obtained the support of the Royal Central Asian Society, backing which was worth more than any cheque they could have given us, for it gave us the official standing with which we could pester the various organiza-

tions upon which we relied for our finance. Accordingly, letter after letter was sent out to countless firms. Typewritten on our own paper, they were carefully composed, dignified—so we hoped—documents, which pointed out in restrained terms the advantages of supporting us, whilst at the same time intimating that the support would not be entirely unwelcome. They must have given several managing directors a good laugh, but their effect was all we could have hoped. Within a few days, offers of assistance were coming in with every mail. Some firms promised reductions, some loans, but the vast majority were prepared to supply us free with everything from electric shavers to lavatory paper. Our central store of equipment—my room—soon became a dump, with paraffin lanterns, paper handkerchiefs, charcoal and aspirin fighting to find a place amongst pressure-cookers, petrol stoves, pots, pans, tents, guns and a hundred other pieces of assorted *bric-à-brac*. My poor landlady began to wear an expression of resigned martyrdom—an “I-can-take-it” expression—as she waited at ten o’clock every morning for the parcels to arrive. My room, with its red felt carpet—the ideal thing for holding on to any form of dirt that happened to be around—became like a charwoman’s nightmare as each parcel was unpacked. It seemed that every firm that was contributing something had a packer who took a fiendish delight in being as extravagant as possible. First there would be lengths of string which would have to be cut as the knots were so gummed up with sealing wax; the wax itself would chip and fall in a fine red shower on to the floor; then there would be paper to tear away, disclosing a cardboard box, whose leaves invariably fell apart to scatter sawdust or shavings; finally, there would be the Object itself, usually wrapped up in tissue paper which would keep a few final scraps of sawdust to discharge as a last joke, and looking pathetically small compared to what had been peeled off it. The Object always arrived in good condition.

It was not long before the news of the project got around the incredibly narrow circle of Cambridge life, and we were soon busy answering questions, fending off nuisances and trying to turn a deaf ear to the prophecies of those who, for one reason or another, thought that we ought not to be going. Those who saw their duty in pointing out the difficulties of organization were rarely those who had done much travelling themselves. They usually gave the impression of being people whose calling was simply that of a dampener of spirits.

"Have you got your visas yet?" they would ask.

We would answer that our permits had not yet come, but that we hoped to have them on the following Wednesday week, at eleven o'clock, when we would be going to see the Secretary at the Royal Afghan Embassy.

"H'm. And what will you do if they don't come?"

"We have three plans, one of which we will surely be able to put into practice."

"I suppose you will," the Disillusioners would say. "You're pretty well committed to go now, with all that junk having arrived. *I mean, you can't send it back, can you?*"

We agreed that we could not.

"Besides, what are you going to *do* out there? I know John is a geographer (for what it's worth), but really—Chris is a very good mechanic and all that, and I am told that Richard is a good photographer; but what *are* you all going to do for two months on top of the Pamirs? I don't suppose you know much about mountaineering."

"Well," we answered, "so little is known about the place we're going to that it would be a waste of time to start analyzing soil and so on. We think that we will do better with the approach of the intelligent layman."

"Sounds like a lot of bull to me. Have you bought your car yet?"

"No. We're hoping to borrow one from one of the companies."

At this point the Disillusioner would give a harsh laugh, enter upon the enumerating of people-he-knew-who-had-tried-the-same-game, finish his third whisky and soda, and stalk out, doubtless to tell others what a mess we were going to be in.

He was nearly right. Very soon we had several hundred pounds' worth of equipment promised or actually having arrived. Storm lanterns, watches, films, chocolate, nylon rope, an electric shaver to work off the car—it was all there, with one important exception: we had no car.

This omission was hardly intentional. We knew that we were most unlikely to get any help from the car companies, and had thought of almost every alternative means of travel. Motor bus, train, aeroplane and boat—even motor-bicycles had in due course come up for discussion, and had been turned down as impossible. To go in an ex-War Department vehicle would have been folly over the roads which we knew we should encounter, with no spares available, and the answer was simple and unequivocal: we must have a new vehicle. The approaches that had already been made had not yielded very encouraging results, and it was with no great hope of success that we wrote to the Rover Company to ask for the loan of a Land-Rover.

Perhaps it was the possibility of a new market; perhaps it was that they saw advertising potential in us; perhaps—and I like to believe this—they were genuinely interested in our trip and merely wanted to help. Whatever the reason, the answer was not a flat “no”, and we all felt unreasonably elated, although final confirmation of our hopes did not come until a few weeks before our departure, when it would have been too late to back out anyway. The prospect of an enormous overdraft at the bank was infinitely more appealing than that of vindicating the Disillusioners.

We did not see very much of one another during the Summer term. Vaguely, we felt that we would, after all, have our fill of each other's company during the holidays, and most of our encounters were on business. Each of us had his own appointed sphere of activity, for which he alone was responsible, and there was little crossing of paths. We would, however, meet at irregular intervals to review progress and discuss controversial points, of which fortunately there were few.

One of these was the matter of guns. We were still sated with Kiplingesque ideas of the North-West Frontier, expecting—and half hoping—that we would meet with hordes of fierce bandits, who would riddle our car with bullets and take all our (insured) load. (Having done this, they would leave us and the car to limp back to England, where we would be the target of an admiring Press.) In addition to the appeal of a running gun-battle with these people, guns would be useful against tigers, wild pig, eagles, geese or perhaps quail, and one school of thought—mine—favoured taking them. Chris, however, does not like guns, as he considers them to make an unnecessary noise; in addition, he held that any bandits would be better armed than us, anyway, and that it was not worth it for the game alone. John thought much the same, but liked the idea of target practice. Richard said he didn't mind bringing a twelve-bore, as he thought vaguely that it might be fun to go out with some native beaters. I myself love playing with any sort of gun from an air-rifle to a twenty-pounder, and was ardently in favour of taking as many as possible. My own point of view prevailed after much argument, and for our whole trip we were cluttered up with a .22, a Service rifle, a twelve-bore and an automatic. How fortunate I was that, even when the guns were adding very considerably to the discomfort of those in the back of the car, none of the others ever reproached me for having insisted on bringing them! The objection to their presence did not lie in the difficulties of getting them across frontiers—accounts of which we later

found to have been greatly exaggerated—but in their very presence, for they are unbelievably difficult to stow, have awkward protrusions, seem to attract every vestige of dust anywhere near them and need a vast amount of cleaning.

The gun controversy, like so many others, was settled at one of our meetings, and it was not long before we began to have an idea of how we were going to be organized for our trip. Letters had been posted to various embassies requesting transit facilities for our dutiable or prohibited equipment, and in due course letters of recommendation to the Customs came back. More travellers were pestered, more lectures were attended, more letters were written and more books were read; as time went on, our ideas about Afghanistan became less wild and more like the truth.

We were going to motor through Austria and Yugoslavia to Istanbul, after which, instead of taking the more usual route to Teheran, which goes by Ankara, Damascus and Baghdad, we would go across eastern Anatolia, past Mount Ararat and into Iran directly without passing through another country. At Teheran we were expected, and after a few days there we would make for the Persian-Afghan frontier, reaching it in the middle of July, and entering the country which had occupied our thoughts all these months. We knew that only a few decades had passed since a more enlightened government had broken with the past and allowed the outside world to peep under the veil of mystery which had lain over the country. We were therefore expecting to find a land whose development along Western lines was considerably retarded, perhaps even justifying the words of one writer who had described Afghanistan as "five hundred years behind Persia, which itself is hardly an advanced country"; a land which might well be lawless, where the traveller might fear for his life and property; a land of atrociously bad roads and of isolation which the arm of the government could not penetrate; a land of great beauty, whose deserts in the south-west would gradually give way to hills, then to mountains, and

finally to a great series of jagged peaks where the Hindu Kush became one with the Pamir, the Karakoram and, eventually, the Kuen Lun; above all, we expected to find Mystery. Perhaps we were expecting too much, and perhaps we should have realized this at the time, but in the absence of any quantity of recent and reliable information the notions grew; for anyone tends to picture the unknown to himself, not as reason would have him believe that it is, but rather as he would like it to be, and subconsciously we must have drawn a thin film over our already vague ideas, diffusing them—but at the same time adding to their attraction, much as a Paris *couturier* will add to the attraction of one of his models by designing a dress which suggests rather than reveals.

Certainly, when we were out in Afghanistan the Mystery never became a reality at all. The area which we finally did visit began to seem commonplace by the time we had been there a day or two, and the Mystery moved on to other places to which we did not go—or, more usually, were not allowed to go. When in Herat, we longed to be in Kabul; once there, we longed to be in the north, where we were in turn tempted by the distant glitter of the snow-capped peaks. No doubt, if we had gone there, another goal would have appeared, dangling the tempting carrot of Mystery before our noses. Such is probably a part of the impulse which drives the explorer on to new discoveries; we had at any rate learned enough to save ourselves from ever making the mistake of calling ourselves explorers.

However, in the earlier days of the summer term we looked forward, not so far even as Asia, but to the moment when we should see the last of English soil, when we could discard, like a rain-soaked overcoat, the mass of worries, of administration and, above all, of paper which had at times made us wonder if it was really going to be worth it. A summer term at Cambridge is not a thing which should wantonly be wasted, and there are always so many things to do—apart from prep-

aration for examinations—that one grudges every moment that is devoted to work of any kind.

* * * *

It had seemed, until a month or so before our departure date, that when we had our equipment and our car more or less in order we would be able to relax, to devote some time to the ever-quickenings social round and, above all, to try to make up for lost time in preparing for the various examinations which hung like Damoclean swords over our heads. We were wrong. For instance, we did not even know about Form C.D.3.

This form is really a perfectly simple document whose main purpose is to ensure that goods are not taken out of the country and sold abroad for foreign currency outside the Bank of England's fatherly auspices. Its great drawback was that no one told us about it until it was almost too late. We came across it almost by accident. I had been talking to one of the Customs officials about one of our many problems, and all seemed to be going well. As I got up to go, he said, quite casually: "I suppose all this is mentioned on your C.D.3, isn't it?"

I was compelled to admit that as far as I knew it was not, for I did not know what a C.D.3 was. The man's expression had been pleasant; now it hardened. Someone without a C.D.3. A bungler, a congenital idiot or—could it be?—a joker. He conferred with his colleague. Reproachfully they stared at me, two pairs of spaniel-like eyes.

"You won't be able to export anything at all without a C.D.3. We don't mind—it's a Bank of England form, anyway—but it will cause endless trouble if you don't have one."

Finally, he consented to tell me that this form could be obtained from a bank.

Feeling something like Alice in Wonderland when she was confronted with advice from a caterpillar, I applied at a bank

for this vital paper, which proved to be a form to be filled in in duplicate. The form, however, did not allow for us, for we had to enter ourselves as both consignor and consignee; we also had to enter a complete list of all our equipment in a space some two inches by one. In due course the form came back with a polite letter from the Bank of England. They suggested that we use more forms next time we applied—to be precise, one form for each article we were taking with us. They also mentioned that they had spotted a mistake in the particulars given, for it was quite impossible that the same party should be both consignor and consignee, and they would be obliged if the error could be rectified on the occasion, to which they were much looking forward, when we should apply again. They also wished to inform us that Export Licences would be required for the goods which had been marked with an asterisk. More C.D.3s were filled in and sent off, and a letter marked "Urgent" was sent to the Board of Trade; in due course more forms arrived, were completed, posted and came back stamped. But it was not as easy as that. The Board of Trade (Export Licensing Branch) had as a parting gesture volunteered the valuable information that whilst they were delighted to sanction the export of goods from England, they were unfortunately quite powerless to assist in the matter of allowing them back into the country. This was a matter for the Board of Trade (Import Licensing Branch). But there was a bright side. By a happy coincidence, the Import Licensing Branch of the Board of Trade was in close and harmonious contact with the Export Licensing Branch, and they had been kind enough to pass my letter on. They (of the Export Licensing Branch) had no doubt whatsoever that we would in due course be hearing from their colleagues in the Import Licensing Branch. Furthermore, they had the honour to be our Obedient Servants.

We never heard from their colleagues, and never worried about it; nor did we ever lose any sleep over the fact that we

had entered Her Britannic Majesty's Ambassador in Kabul as the consignee of all our equipment on the C.D.3.

* * * *

The weeks slipped by, leaving as impermanent a trace as the wake of a ship. Gradually we were able to tick off all the items on our list of things to be done, and they were replaced by others, more down-to-earth. We had started with "theoretical" matters, such as Form C.D.3 or visas; then we had graduated to logistics—petrol, medical supplies and spare parts; now was the time for us to tackle the details which could have made us so uncomfortable as a reproof for our forgetting them. Frying-pans, kettles, writing paper, nail scissors, ink (we nearly forgot the ink), shoe polish—they all had to be remembered and to find their way to the terrifying pile which was accumulating in our store-room (I could no longer refer to it as a bedroom). Presents arrived for us every morning, most of which, having been asked for, were welcome; some, however, such as the two huge cases of bone charcoal and a crate of paper handkerchiefs which arrived together one morning, no one knew quite why or whence, were less welcome, as they had to be put in the space where I should have liked my bed to be.

* * * *

Finally, the great day arrived when we could go round to Rovers' and collect the Land-Rover which was to be our home for that summer. We looked at it with awe which soon gave way to immense gaiety. We signed the form which guaranteed the Rover Company full payment for damage to the machine, without so much as looking at it. We shook hands with the surprised employees of the firm, gave short barks of excited staccato laughter, heard the instructions of their technicians without listening to them, shook hands again, handed a slip to the guard at the gate, and soon we were heading, jerkily at first but with rapidly increasing confidence,

down the road that leads to Northampton and Cambridge. It was a beautiful car.

"See, how smooth the gear change is," one of us would say as he engaged second gear with a sharp *g—unk*. The other would look up with hate in his eyes.

"Look here, you'll kill the poor brute—and don't go so fast. Mr. Ward said the car had a new engine and had to be driven slowly."

The first, momentarily abashed, would slow down, only to speed up again as soon as he thought it safe. We looked at our reflection in shop windows. What a beautiful, *business-like* vehicle! Everybody should be sharing in our joy.

"LOOK," we wanted to shout, "*LOOK—we're just off. Look at our new toy.*" The passers-by did look, particularly when we ground the gears, but not as much as we wanted. Our pride in the Brute—for so we referred to it from then on—was inordinate.

Now equipped with our Brute, it was easy to go to London on any pretext, and we registered seven hundred miles—or seven return journeys—in a week. This would have been unnecessary under normal circumstances, but there was only one thing which could happen now to spoil our plans and to prejudice our project, and happen it did. Three weeks before our date of departure, the mighty wheels of Britain's railroads creaked to a halt. Postal services were curtailed and delayed, roads were doubly crowded, deliveries of goods were cancelled and tempers were frayed, whilst a frantic government parleyed for days, weeks, with adamant railwaymen. British Railways had gone on strike.

It may be several years before the full effect on Britain's economy of this strike can be gauged, but we gave little thought to this side of the matter. What did concern us was that a very large quantity of equipment was at that very moment due to be forwarded to us by rail. Furthermore, we could not go without it, for it included our sleeping-bags, compasses, clothes and tents, as well as our jerry-cans. Hours

were spent queueing outside crowded telephone boxes, and when we were finally able to get through it was only to talk with a harassed official at the other end of the line who had countless other problems to deal with and who seemed unlikely (so we thought) to get our own knot untied in time. In addition to this, we all had examinations to take.

"The polite fiction that we maintain at Cambridge," a tutor once said, "is that undergraduates are here to work." Looking at us, no one would have dreamed of saying even as little as this for the taking of examinations. An examination would be preceded by a burst of conversation on the telephone with the War Office; notes were made on scraps of paper between, or even during, individual questions, and when the paper was over there would be a further spate of trunk-calls. Revision had to be kept within strict limits, and usually took place during the small hours of the morning. The end of the examinations was welcomed, not only for its own sake, but mainly for the fact that it gave more time for the telephone. Trunk-calls, visits to London, Birmingham or Manchester, visits to the doctor for injections, parties, more examinations, hasty letters—all merged into a long blur during those hectic weeks.

* * * *

It was a mistake to let the national Press get hold of us. We realized this afterwards, and realized that we should have been satisfied with our arrangement to send articles to the *Sunday Times* from Afghanistan, but at the time it seemed quite a good idea. We had, after all, had very considerable help from various companies, and it was only fair that they should be allowed to read about us in the papers; in addition, they might find some publicity value in it to repay them for their trouble. So we started with the University newspaper *Varsity*, who splashed a great headline about us across one of their centre pages: "FOUR MEN TO FIND A LOST MOUNTAIN—*Desert of Death trip follows.*" This was hardly an auspicious beginning, for neither of these two rather-over-dramatized

aims were considered by us to be of any great importance; finding the mountain was a subsidiary aim, whilst the "Desert of Death" was merely a short-cut which we hoped to take on our route back. However, we refused to learn our lesson, and unwisely got in touch with a number of other papers with a national circulation. These did not give as much space to us as *Varsity* had done—for which we thanked Heaven, for they all telephoned *Varsity* for their version of the story; but most gave some space to us, ranging from the chatty gossip columns, which were more interested in the fact that John and I had each been Head of the School at Harrow and that Chris was a grandson of Lord Jellicoe, than in what we were going to do, to the more sensational papers which made much of our mountain, went on to mention lawless Pathan bandits and the guns that we were carrying, and ended by hinting darkly at espionage. Nevertheless, we got away lightly compared to Chris, who had given himself over to one of our friends who had a connexion with a West Country newspaper. Chris lives in Hampshire, and the local newspapers, prompted by our friend, were not slow to find it out. Soon they were carrying on in the best traditions of the English Press. "LORD JELlicoe's GRANDSON OFF TO FIND A MOUNTAIN," they would bellow, "... with a modest smile, Mr Balfour admitted that he was only lightly armed . . . barbarous regions where the incessant tribal warfare . . . Desert of Death. . . ." Chris took it all like a man, but we were more careful on our return. The cuttings of these articles had been a source of considerable embarrassment when they had appeared some weeks later, in their stark horror, on the desk of the Press Minister in Kabul.

* * * *

So our last weeks shortened into days, and the days into hours, and our decision to give a monster cocktail party so that we should all be able to leave England the next morning with a hang-over—probably our last for some months—be-

gan to seem a very good one. It was just one more thing to organize, but we actually felt a little sorry for ourselves at the thought of being away for so long, and a headache would ease the parting. The morning of that day was spent rushing around to all points of the compass in order to collect the things which had not yet arrived. Chris went tearing off to Berkshire for our sleeping-bags, whilst Richard drove to Manchester, John went to London and I stayed at Cambridge. Our minds were made little easier when the suspicion which had been lurking in the backs of our minds that our passports had got lost somewhere was confirmed, and even cocktails never dispelled our constant anxiety as to whether there was any chance of their arriving in time.

Last-minute telephone calls, valedictory telegrams, letters and loading, with the organizing of a party in the middle of it—all this took up our time, and we longed for more hands to deal with it all, to give us just a few moments when we could sit and think. It all got done in the end—the men whom we had thought to be broken reeds when we had talked to them on the telephone turned out to be magnificently reliable, and news came that package after package of our equipment had arrived at Southend Airport in spite of the strike, and was waiting for us there. We could now expect everything to be in order for our departure—everything, that is, except for the jerry-cans, which had to be collected that evening.

The party was a success. Whoever had mixed the drinks had disguised something very strong indeed as a harmless and likeable wine-cup, and conversation was soon going gushingly in a rather steamy atmosphere. It was fortunate that the May Dances had ensured the presence of a number of girls—so many Cambridge parties degenerate into a brawl in their absence—for things might have otherwise got out of control. As it was, we were very soon laughing far too much and the loading of the car afterwards proceeded merrily, although it took rather longer than it might otherwise have done. How-

ever, it was a pleasant evening, and none of us grudged the fact that we had to stay up until the small hours as a result of it.

* * * *

So it was that two men sat on a Cambridge pavement late on a June evening, and welcomed with a loud cheer the deafening clatter that heralded the arrival of jerry-cans. The last knot in the mesh of our plan—or rather, not quite the last because our passports were still lost—had been tied, and we were ready to go. We loaded the jerry-cans into the car, and knew that the moment for which we had been waiting was now within reach. It was a slight anti-climax—instead of elation, we felt worried about the passports, tired and slightly sad: there was no large and admiring crowd waiting to see us off. Sidney Street was now almost deserted. The Brute's ungainly shape was further distorted by the great piles of luggage on its roof as it waited under the gas-light for the moment, now only a few hours away, when it would be able to start its journey eastwards.

Chapter Two

EASTWARD BOUND

OUR departure was conditioned by the twin facts that we still had no passports, and that we could change neither its time nor its date. The arrangement was therefore made that I would fly across to Calais with the car at the scheduled time, accompanied by Nigel Bain, a friend who was coming with us as far as Istanbul instead of Richard, who would be joining us there. Between us, we had one passport—Nigel's—and I hoped at any rate not to be sent back before Chris and John should have arrived with the three missing ones. This was the way that we hoped our plans would be the least put out, and by driving long hours we should reach Istanbul on time.

Nigel and I left Cambridge in a fine drizzle which made driving an already overloaded car doubly difficult. The road to Southend was, however, fairly clear and we arrived in good time for the aeroplane which was to fly us and our car to Calais in about a quarter of the time that it takes by sea. No sooner had we stowed the parcels that were waiting for us and completed the various formalities than I was tapped on the shoulder by a man from the B.B.C., who said he wanted to make a recording of my voice for a programme that evening. Dazzled at the unexpected honour, I willingly agreed, and he led me over to a sinister black van equipped with a tape-recorder and a technician.

"Now, tell us all about it," said the man.

Perhaps it was the words with their soothing import; perhaps it was the technician, or the sympathetic look of the tape-recorder; whatever it was, it unleashed something in me. I told the microphone of our plans: of their apparent frus-

tration by an unfeeling bureaucracy; I poured out my woes about permits, about the postal services and the Government, and ended with a vitriolic attack on the morals of the strikers and of governments in general.

"Come, come now," said the man from the B.B.C. "This won't do. It's not a party political broadcast, you know. Let's try again, and do be more restrained. Tell us about yourselves."

So we tried again. He seemed very pleased this time, and within a few moments I was listening to my own voice, sounding oddly plummy, talking in "strong, confident tones" about the Mountain, the heat, the Desert of Death and the High Pamir as if they were a list of groceries. The names which had become so familiar through long poring over maps lacked any of their old sparkle, and flying to France hardly felt differently from driving to London.

At half-past one the flight was over, and as one of the French newspapers whose reporter was at the airport to welcome us put it, "a Lander-Rover, colour sand, emerged from the entrails of an aeroplane which had just placed itself upon the aerodrome of Calais—Marck." No sooner had we landed on French soil and passed the French police ("*Pas de passeport, monsieur? Ça va. Passez, monsieur*") than we were dragged off into Calais to the *Grand Garage Purfina*, where we were treated to a champagne party at the expense of the Petrofina Company, which was giving us free petrol. Great signs were plastered over every available inch of the car, exhorting all who saw and admired us to use Purfina as we were doing, and the car quickly took on the appearance of a shop window at the Spring Sales. We had missed luncheon and had had an early breakfast: as a result, the effect of the champagne was all that could have been wished, and Nigel and I soon forgot to worry about the others in England. We passed the afternoon somehow, and eventually drove off to spend the night in a ditch somewhere.

16th June. Vitry le François

Today we rose at a leisurely hour and made our way to the airport, where we arrived towards midday.

"*Les autres . . . ? Ah, oui, ils sont là, monsieur,*" said the policeman in answer to my query, pointing to a pair of figures, recumbent in the middle of a field and in the full sunlight. It seemed that they had been less comfortable than we, having spent the night lying on a concrete floor. No, they hadn't heard me on the B.B.C., they said crossly, they had been getting things fixed. Yes, of course they had the passports, which had been vegetating in a cupboard in the Yugoslav Consulate; they wouldn't be here if they hadn't got them, would they? And now would we please stop asking stupid questions and could we get going? They were rather tired, they added. We stopped asking stupid questions and got going at once.

17th June. Kempten

Long hours of driving brought us to Basel in the afternoon, and we crossed the border into Switzerland on foot in order to change our travellers' cheques into banknotes on the free market. Soon, we were on the antiquated ferry which carries traffic across the Rhine and into Germany. We no longer owed allegiance to Purfina, and so we were watched, whilst we scraped their unbelievably tenacious stickers off the car, by a crowd of giggling German girls, who thought it a great joke—so typical of the *verrückte Engländer*. They thought it even funnier when the captain of the ferry made us clear up the mess. A cheery race, these Germans, with such a well-developed and imaginative sense of humour. We got to bed rather late.

18th June. Near Graz

Down the *autobahn* and into Austria. We called at the B.P. garage, where the Brute, so recently stripped of its finery, was again decorated with a different kind of sign. "*B.P. Visco-*

Static Öl," they read, "*das beste Öl für den Motor*." They looked a little vulgar, but worth it for the fifty gallons of free petrol which would, I hoped, take us to Salonika. We crossed the mountains, and the country is now much softer—a land of rolling hills which get less and less as we go south. It is also much warmer, and I think we have seen our last rain for some months. We are camping in a most delightful spot—well away from the road, and by a stream; everything is going well, and we are catching up on our schedule. Chris and Nigel alternate with John and myself to sit in front, each doing a two-hour spell of driving. So far everybody seems to be getting on beautifully with everyone else—still, we have only been going for three days.

19th June. Near Brod

As we did some shopping in Graz this morning, I talked to a few Austrians about Yugoslavia in order to find out what it is like. Amongst them were two *Volksdeutsche* who had just escaped, and to every question they answered "*schrecklich*." The Customs were awful, the roads awful, the food awful and the Government awful. We were sure to be thrown in gaol for smuggling.

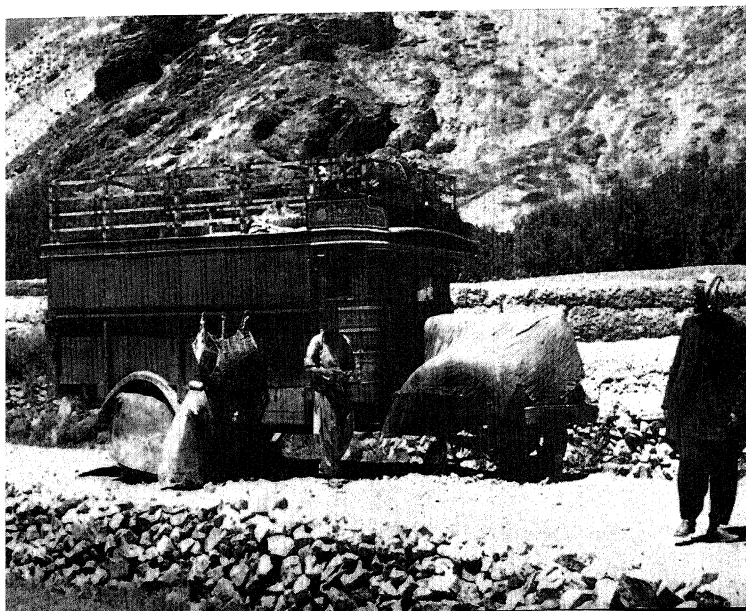
"Why do you go into Yugoslavia?" they asked. "All the clever ones are going out." We were not looking forward to crossing the frontier, but when it came to it the guard seemed more interested in whether the *Reader's Digest* counted as pornography than in the boxes of ammunition lying just beside it. He was a very pleasant fellow, who waved us through after a perfunctory search.

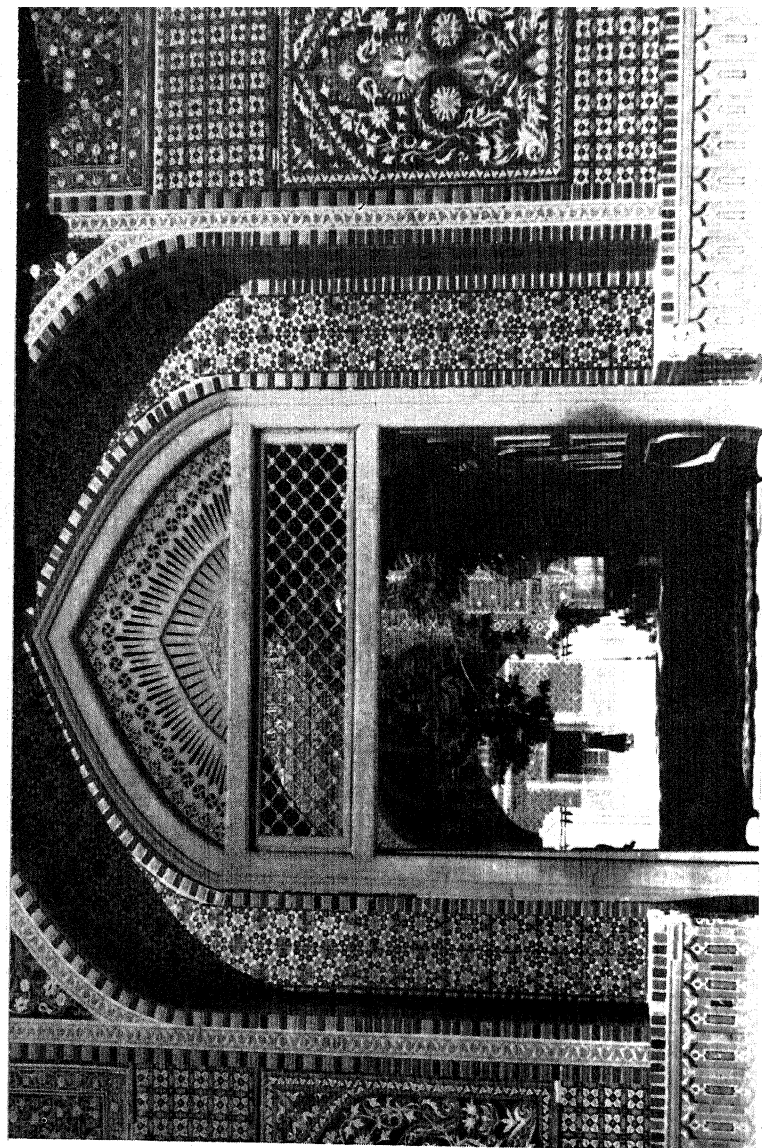
This country is certainly different from the comparative prosperity of Austria. The people look well enough, but towns are incredibly squalid, with ill-paved roads, almost no street-lighting, no advertisements and no evidence of any effort at maintenance. Things are not cheap either, as all our money has had to be bought at the official rate of exchange, giving us about half what our pounds are worth. There is almost no



The meeting with the Frenchmen. The author is nearest the camera; *la petite poule* is the girl in the group at the right

A lorry stops for repairs





The gateway
to the
shrine at
Mazar-i-Sharif

traffic on the roads, and the horses are obviously not used to cars. We have more or less finished with the hills now, and it is much drier.

We finally made our way to the *Autoput* which links Zagreb and Belgrade. It was not as good as the German ones, but there was no traffic except for the occasional cart, so we went as fast as we pleased. We have gone on late again to-night and have bedded down, dog-tired, a few hundred yards from the road.

20th June. Near Skoplje

A most pleasant surprise awaited us when we awoke—three very pretty girls in local dress were watching their sheep a few yards away, and singing as they sat. It was a delightful sound; they proved most friendly, helping us to cook breakfast and load the car. They told us that we were up far too late—no less than the truth, for it was nearly half-past eight—and then posed with Nigel for a photograph. We were quite sorry to say good-bye to them as we set off for Belgrade.

The countryside has been monotonous today. We crossed the Danube at Belgrade; afterwards the road deteriorated at about the same time as we began to notice the change-over from Roman script to Cyrillic on the signposts. The people all smiled broadly at us, although one or two have slyly hinted at dissatisfaction with the Tito régime; they are usually the old ones who have known better times before the war. They will not speak in front of anyone else, but when alone they make their dissatisfaction quite plain.

We are getting into a routine now: two hours in front, two in the back, and every other period in front is spent driving. It works very well; we are all getting used to the unfamiliar conditions, I feel. Our averages are surprisingly high considering the bad roads. We usually get moving by about a quarter to nine, having had breakfast and washed up; we drive steadily until one or two, when we have a very light luncheon; after this we simply press on until we have got

where we intend to get, when we cook dinner in our pressure-cookers and go to bed, usually rather late, as we are all keeping diaries and Chris likes to tinker with the engine.

21st June. Near Kavalla

We are definitely in the East now. I realized that this morning as we drove through Skoplje, which was quite a pleasant town, if rather dreary and grey, with a river running through it; it had a very Central European character. We drove along the river for a mile or so, and just on the outskirts of the town we saw a sight that brought home to us the fact that we were near Asia. A few ragged urchins were paddling in the river just upstream of some equally ragged girls. They were dancing and laughing around something, and were poking sticks into it. On closer inspection I made out what it was: a dead pig, its carcase bloated with age.

It was not long before we were at the frontier. The guards spoke only Serbo-Croat and a few words of Russian, which they had learned in the school some years earlier. They were very interested in us, kept on asking what we studied, and repeated "*odin—miekhaniku: odin—geografiyu; odin—yazyki, y drugoi—ekonomiyu,*" after which they burst into peals of laughter and slapped us all on the back. On entering Greece, we were greeted with rather unexpected friendliness before being sent on our way, having filled countless forms, along the magnificent new road that now leads to Salonika.

Our first view of the Mediterranean made us wish that we were staying there—it was a beautiful blue, and the sea-front at Salonika with the White Tower at the end was all that we could have asked. However, we could not stay, so we changed back to Purfina stickers on the car, filled up with petrol, and set out along the lovely coastal road. We camped by the sea.

22nd June

We were awakened this morning by a number of small boys, who grinned at us, shook our hands, looked at our

watches, sang and asked us who we were. The fact that their donkeys were soon busily engaged in chewing our sleeping-bags got us up, amidst shrieks of laughter, rather more quickly than might otherwise have been the case. For some reason, there were flies everywhere, and breakfast was a most unpleasant affair. Slightly bad-tempered, we arrived in Xanthi, where we were immediately harangued by an English-speaking Greek youth, who told us that England had betrayed Greece, that Greece's only friend was America and that Cyprus was Greek. He then told us that we were like Turks, and that the only fate we deserved was to go to Turkey. The situation looked quite unpleasant, as a large crowd had gathered around us, and it was not made any better when John reminded them that the Americans were arming Turkey as well as Greece. We left Xanthi with an unpleasant taste in our mouths and made for the Turkish frontier.

The Turkish guard knew English. That is to say that his knowledge of English exceeded our knowledge of his language, but what he said was rendered unintelligible by the fact that he munched a cucumber as he talked, and had an unhappy habit of using the wrong word.

"Where is your profession?" he asked.

"Cambridge."

He wrote busily, with a brand-new American fountain-pen, the words "4 Cambridges" in the first column of an enormous book. (*Crunch, crunch*, went the cucumber.)

"Why did you get your passport?"

"To travel with."

"Yes, yes, I know. You got them at a passport shop in Cambridge, didn't you?" (*Crunch-crunch-crunch*.)

Our four passports had been issued in four different places; we agreed that they all came from the passport shop in Cambridge. The new American pen flitted across the book; above it, the face of the officer gazed intently as he took great bites out of the cucumber held in his left hand. Soon, he was satisfied. With a wave of his cucumber he welcomed us to Turkey,

cautioning us not to stay more than two days without reporting to the police, as we should otherwise be overstaying our welcome.

We drove off into the dark, passed Edirne, and settled for the night just outside the town.

23rd June. Istanbul

We arrived here after a very monotonous run through a military zone—apparently half the Turkish Army is here to guard the Bulgarian frontier (the Bulgarians are said to be in equal concentration on the other side). Istanbul is lovely, with the port, the impressive mosques and the strange, narrow winding streets. We met Hugh Wilson here; he is an official of British Petroleum, and he very kindly asked us to stay in his flat. He looks very harassed—largely, I suspect, because of the demands of the social round which appear to be unusually exacting here. This evening he had off though, and we were able to see Istanbul by night. We insisted on seeing the red-light district behind Istiklal Street, and so dragged him off to show it to us. It was an unusually squalid sight.

24th June. Izmit

We left Istanbul this evening. Richard joined us for luncheon and we said good-bye to Nigel, who seems to be in for a very good stay in Turkey. Richard seems in fine form, having just flown from London; he celebrated the fact by driving in the wrong direction down a one-way street in one of the towns at sixty, and would have carried on if a jeep full of angry-looking policemen had not come hurtling up from the opposite direction. Tonight is the last that we shall be spending anywhere near sea-level for some time; I expect we shall be glad to be here again.

25th June. Bala

After a few hours, we climbed up on to the plateau which forms most of Central Turkey. Where yesterday it was a green and fertile countryside, we have now been through a

forestry belt and are amongst the rolling brown hills which will, I fear, become rather monotonous. Ankara was a very fine modern city, with no sort of character and set in a dust-bowl; it had broad avenues and is generally very pleasing. It was our last really civilized town before Teheran, and we made the most of it, stocking up with provisions.

26th June

There was little variation in the countryside today: it has been simply the bare, windy Anatolian plateau, stretching for miles and miles, in places well cultivated, with vast wheat-fields which have great combine harvesters standing by them; in other places brown and barren. There has been quite a lot of wild life around today. In addition to game birds and the odd fox, there have been a number of cranes—or were they storks?—which, when seen perched on the roof-tops in the Turkish villages, made me think of Odense and Hans Andersen.

The people are all dressed in the same way, with their baggy black Turkish trousers and a European coat, topped by a shapeless black cap; they are always very friendly, but betray little curiosity. I think they are not unlike the English—there is that same stolid, unimaginative, reserved streak in them.

At night, although it is far from hot, we can see heat lightning to the north. It is very bright—so much so that I can still see it flickering through my eyelids when I close my eyes.

27th June. Sivas

Another dusty day across the plateau. Everywhere there are storks and other bright-coloured birds, and now there is a new kind of animal which must be a lemming; they have long bodies, rather like a very small ferret; and they draw themselves up on their hind legs to their full six inches height as we pass, staring at us in beady-eyed indignation before they scamper off to a nearby cornfield. There are as well, of

course, countless herds of fat-tailed sheep, those peculiar Central Asian animals which store up blubber for the winter in their tails, which consequently swell up to the size of a football and which one would expect to hinder them as they walk. Indeed, their tails do swing about alarmingly, but they are surprisingly agile. Many of the flocks of these sheep, as well as the herds of the black cows, of which there are quite a number here, seem to be looked after by tiny tots of about eight; they are very sturdy-looking children who have their work well in hand, and one cannot help thinking what a tough breed they must be.

At Kayseri we were for the first time since Greece the centre of a crowd; it was a very different kind of crowd, though, for they all chattered at the tops of their voices, rubbed dust off the car windows in order to be able to look in, and begged us to take photographs of them. We did this, and gave one particularly voluble boy a shiny English magazine to look at. On the inside page there was an advertisement for cigarettes portraying a bearded sailor. He asked us who the funny bearded man was. Fortunately we had two words of Turkish available to meet the situation: the one—*Deniz*, meaning sea—derived from advertisements for the Maritime Bank, the other—*Ercek*, meaning man—deduced from the fact that this was the word written on the outside of men's lavatories. We told him that it was a picture of an *Engliz Deniz Ercek*; at which point he burst into laughter and called his friends to look at the new species—an English Sea Man.

The women are now beginning to wear tribal costumes like those of the Kurds in Persia and Iraq, and the countryside is greener. It is very curious—one may travel for a day without seeing more than a handful of people in the fields, but at dusk there will always be hundreds of them, with carts and all, on the road. Everywhere we have been in Turkey it has been the same; one can only suppose that they work behind the hills, and that this cultivation goes on, more or less unending, to the Black Sea.

In the evening we arrived at Sivas, one of the big market towns of Central Turkey, and asked for Halim Bey, the B.P. agent who is supposed to be giving us petrol. Chris and Richard and I went off with a little Turk to find him, inquiring in a number of shops, including a tailor's and another that looked like a brothel. We ran him to earth in the courtyard of his very pleasant house, where we were introduced to his family—none of whom spoke a word of anything but Turkish—and given lemonade. Eventually Halim Bey's son arrived, and led us all to the municipal hotel, where we understood that we were to collect some water. Great was our surprise on entering to find the receptionist demanding our passports, and in spite of repeated protestations that we did not wish to stay we found ourselves being escorted upstairs by the manager, his children, several of the guests at the hotel, and Halim Bey's indefatigable son. Everyone as usual chattered, and they all came in to have a look at our rooms, which are, in fact, very good, with basins and running water. Apparently we are being put up at Halim Bey's expense, so we went to the dining-room and had an excellent dinner served by a waiter who taught us the Turkish for "thank you".

28th June. Erzincan

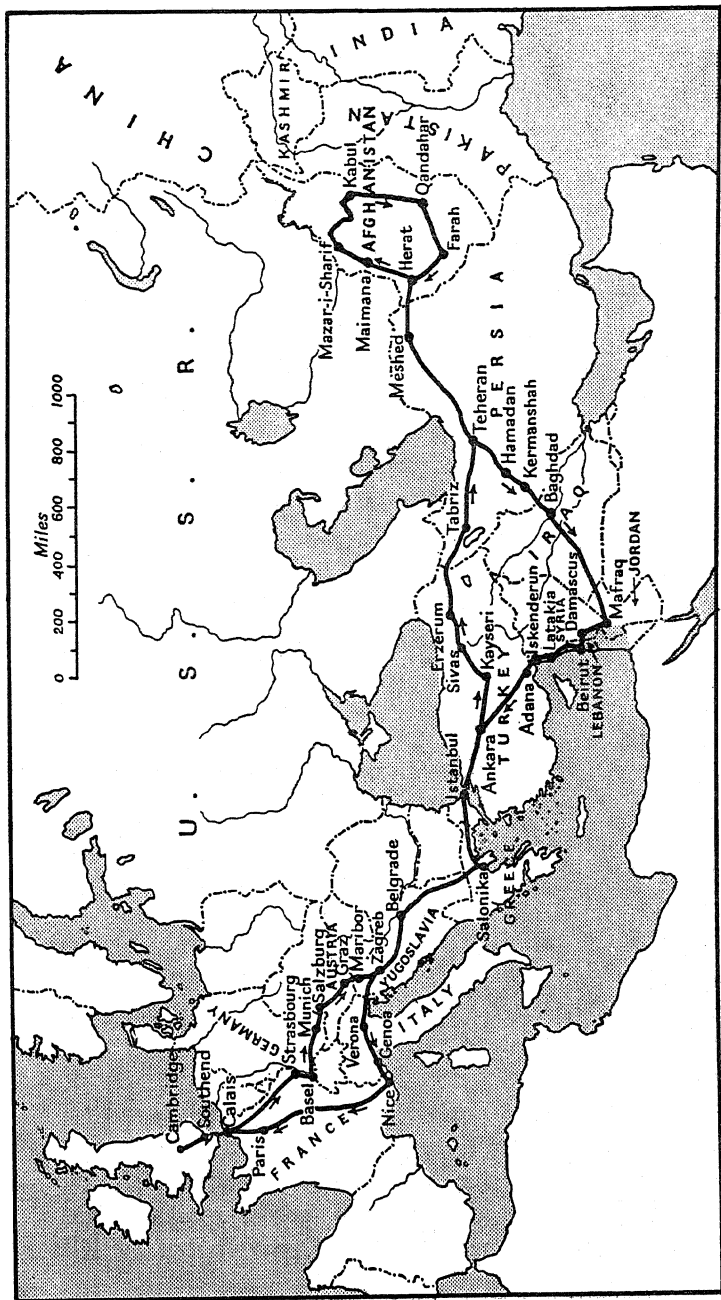
We had quite a shock this morning. Having slept very well in our surprisingly good beds—the municipal hotel is really very good—we went round to have breakfast. After the inevitable tea and boiled eggs—served by the same waiter who had taught us a few words of Turkish the evening before—we went round to say good-bye to Halim Bey's son. We arrived at his shop and found him sitting at a desk, looking rather official as he banged away on an antiquated German typewriter. He was a model of politeness, but asked us to remain in his office whilst he finished his typing. After innumerable crossings-out and re-typings he handed us the result—a bill for our rooms, our dinner and our breakfast.

He explained that he was going to send the bill to B.P. in Istanbul, who would be delighted to pay. We felt that this was rather much and offered to pay ourselves, but he would not hear of it, and so, with some qualms, we signed the bill. What Hugh is going to think when he gets it I don't know, and I only hope that B.P.'s generosity and patience will stand this test!

It has been a really lovely day's ride. We climbed to about nine thousand feet after Sivas, and entered the most beautiful countryside I have seen so far. Everywhere there were flowers—the blue of gentian, the mauve of lavender and the pink of gorse mingled with red poppies and yellow plantagenet against a background of every shade of green, from the bright emerald of the grass growing by the streams to the sombre olive of the pinewoods clinging to the rocky sides of the hills. Behind were great purply-brown mountains rolling away eastwards to the snow-caps on the horizon. Above, the sky was deep blue, with little cotton-wool clouds. The air was clean and cold, with the scent of jasmine and countless other flowers in it, and all around we saw storks and even an occasional eagle. The road was no more than a track here, and there were very few people about. I think that country like this could easily be made touristy—thank Heaven it has been spared that horror so far—but there would undoubtedly be the difficulty of finding something for tourists to do, as the mountains could not compare with the Alps for ski-ing. Perhaps it will always remain like this, beautiful in its loneliness.

The lovely winding road soon went down, however, in a series of nerve-racking hairpin bends which strained the brakes, the driver and the passengers about equally, and we drove along a river to camp just past Erzincan. A very short run in distance, but we shall none of us forget this scenery in a hurry.

As we were preparing dinner, we saw a number of very large and very nasty-looking spiders which gathered round our lantern; we killed some with boiling water, but there



OUR ROUTE

must be many more and we may end up with some rather unwelcome company in bed.

29th June. Karaköse

Today we had to face the horrors of the Military Zone near Erzurum, about which we have heard so much. It was really most impressive: on entry to it, we were greeted by a very smart officer who showed us a card on which were printed the words: "TURKISH ARMY SECURITY ZONE. All foreign travellers are prohibited to make photographs. All foreign travellers will be accompanied by an officer to Pasinler. Unauthorized halts prohibited. Welcome, and compliments of the Commander." The words were written in English, French and German, and armed with their authority a most charming subaltern climbed into the car and we moved off. A choking white dust cloud seemed to lie permanently over the road, thrown up by the scores of Army vehicles which pass along it; the dust mixed with our sweat to form a fine mud all over us. To either side we could dimly make out the vast camps, with modern American tanks in their hundreds, as well as guns, jeeps, lorries, and petrol and ammunition dumps. The Turkish soldiers are a particularly business-like crowd, being squat, broad and immensely powerful-looking fellows. There is no spit-and-polish about them (they do not even wear regimental badges), but they are obviously tough and well trained.

At Erzurum we stopped for petrol and a *limonata*, the delicious Turkish lemonade. Having stopped for so long, we thought we might as well have luncheon, and our officer took us to a rather repulsive-looking restaurant. Had we not been with him, I am sure that we would not have stayed out of gaol for more than five minutes, for we were followed by a pair of very unpleasant and officious detectives who took our passports from us and kept them at the police-station whilst we had our luncheon. It was very hot, and we were glad to pay for our meal (in spite of protests that the bill

should be sent to the long-suffering B.P.) and leave. We have acquired a very healthy respect both for the Turkish Army and their security system. We dropped our officer at Pasinler and went on.

This is now the beginning of Azerbaijan, the strip of land between the Caspian and Black seas. The sky is beginning to look cloudy and the air is damp and slightly misty. The setting sun shed an eerie unreal light over the same bare brown hills; a flock of birds was quite silvery as it flew past overhead, and to the east we could see a perfect double rainbow. There are no trees here, for we are not far from the snow-line, but the grass, where it grows, is greener than ever, with its edges turned to silver in the light. As an occasional puff of wind rustles over it, this grass undulates and sparkles like a bright emerald sea.

30th June. Khoi

This trip is really worth doing. Today we got up early in order to leave plenty of time at the frontier, and had been motoring for only an hour or so when we turned a corner, to be greeted by the great conical mass of Ararat rising, seemingly out of a plain, to touch the clouds. It is truly a third sister to the Persian Demavend and the Japanese Fuji; its cone looks just as perfect. All morning we had it with us, and it seemed as if we would never pass it.

The Customs at the Turkish-Persian frontier were unexpectedly quick, and it was only three hours before we were heading along a rapidly-worsening road to Tabriz. At the frontier post we met a Danish girl who was travelling by bus, alone, to Teheran. We asked her if this was not slightly risky, but she assured us that she had been treated with the greatest courtesy in Turkey—surely a very fine reflection on the Turks, for it would not have been hard to take advantage of a girl travelling by herself in these parts. Her bus had been waiting since five in the morning, and at midday it had not even entered Iran, so our own time was good. We could have

done it more quickly, but the Persians had had a letter from Teheran about us, and insisted on sealing our guns in a great ungainly parcel, which was a very lengthy business. They were quite delighted at my few words of Persian, and showed me off as a prize exhibit to a number of yokels who happened to come wandering in.

I wonder why it is that a frontier, which here, at any rate, is a purely political boundary, always seems to demarcate two very different kinds of countryside as well as two countries. For instance, in Turkey the predominant colour was the fat and prosperous green of the fields. Here, with the mass of Ararat still visible behind us, everything is brown, and it seems that there is very much less rain. Can it be that the Persians, with their rather sloppier cultivation, are themselves responsible for the aridity, and that the crops in Turkey actually attract rainfall? It would really seem so, for here we are quite definitely in the land of Hajji Baba. The houses are built of mud, the towns are dusty and the whole effect is pleasantly unmodernized. The people are always laughing and seem very gay.

Today we met another car, curiously enough a Land-Rover as well, filled with three Australians on their way to England. They were a very cheerful crowd, had motored up from Ceylon and found plenty to talk about with us. What a strange meeting, with conventional "How-do-you-do's" contrasting with the barren background of this wild place. The worst part of their journey was over, and the realization began to hit us that the worst part of ours was yet to come. We have camped down in a wadi for the night and there are a great many mosquitoes here.

1st July. Near Mianeh

For the rest of the way into Tabriz the road was awful, with an atrocious surface, and extremely dusty. I rather think it is going to be like this for the rest of the way to Teheran and probably after. We arrived in Tabriz, which is an unex-

pectedly modern town, only to find that as it was Friday (the Muslim day of rest) we could not change any money. Petrol is ridiculously cheap here at under one-and-ten a gallon, but we were without any money at all. A friendly bystander took me to find the money-changer—indeed, he chased him with me for an hour, but we never found him. I finally ended up in the American Consulate—we have not re-opened ours yet—changing a few of our dollars into rials, which has saved us an afternoon.

The people were on the whole very suspicious, probably because of their nearness to Russia. They kept on thinking that we were “American warmongers”, and in spite of our most vigorous denials they would not get the thought out of their heads that we were Americans and not Englishmen. Whenever we stopped or went anywhere on foot, we were watched by a large and somewhat smelly crowd, who did nothing but stare at us in a particularly bovine way. They did not seem hostile, but rather merely curious, looking at us with wide-open mouths or occasionally prodding us to see if we really did exist. I suspect that one man, who looked more intelligent than the others and who followed us more closely, was, in fact, another detective, but this may be imagination. We also began to come across a word which will certainly become more and more familiar—*ajazeh*, meaning a permit or permission. I asked if it would be in order to go up the citadel and take a photograph of the town.

“*Ajazeh nist* (it is not allowed),” said the guard at the gate.

“Can I get permission?”

“*Memnu’ ast. Jumeh ast*,” was the answer. (“It is forbidden. It is Friday.”)

It eventually transpired that in order to take a photograph from the citadel permission was needed from the police. Unfortunately, the police officer (who had actually been seen in his office yesterday) was away today, as it was Friday and he was in need of rest; if we would wait until tomorrow, we were sure to get our permits, but otherwise there was nothing to be

done. I refused the guard's very pressing offer of tea and hospitality for the night, and gave up the idea of a photograph from the citadel. We were soon on the main Teheran road and heading south.

2nd July. Teheran

The country between Tabriz and Teheran is really not very interesting; it is an arid, rolling plateau where nothing much seems to happen. The days we have spent driving across it have been hot and dusty—as a result our tempers have been tried but as yet not strained: all is still well between us and there have been no quarrels to speak of.

There was a tremendous amount of traffic on this road, and each time we passed anything coming in the opposite direction we had to close our windows because of the dust. The worst, however, was overtaking, for it is impossible to see past the dust-screen thrown up by these lumbering great diesel lorries, and they paid no more attention to our horn than they would to the buzzing of a fly. To either side of the road we occasionally got glimpses of kilometre-stones (now written in Arabic numerals), giving the distance from Teheran with a fine disregard for exactitude. Seventy-five, forty-two, seventy-nine, they read . . . eighty-three, one hundred, eleven, two. At Qazvin, a hundred miles from Teheran, we telephoned to the Embassy to make sure that we were expected. It was quite an experience. A telephone operator in Persia needs to combine skill, such as would be required of the best of his equivalents in Europe, with proverbial patience and perseverance. After much cranking and talking, interspersed with remarks about how he liked England and, after we had offered him some, English cigarettes in particular, he got us through and we learned to our great relief that we were expected.

We drove on east, stopping only to swim in a river and to put on the sadly-crumpled suits that we had brought with us from England. The last part of the road we covered in the

twilight, and we had no idea that we were anywhere near our destination until we arrived. At one moment we were in the desert, with a haze cutting visibility down to a few miles. Then we were passing the airport on our right, and almost immediately Teheran had gathered itself up from where it had been hiding in the desert and leaped upon us in a whirling chaos of brilliant headlamps, blowing policemen's whistles, hooting horns and roaring traffic. Great garishly-painted buses rushed past us, their brilliant oranges blending strangely with bilious greens and outlandish mauves, the whole looking more garish still in the greenish light of the hundreds of incandescent lanterns which had been set up by the countless stalls lining the road. Pedestrians appeared beneath our feet, horns honked, brakes squealed, more whistles blew—and we were soon in the British Embassy.

Here was a contrast—a haven of peace. We drove under the great archway of the main entrance, and might have been in another world. "SPEED LIMIT 12 MPH," said the signs primly, "PLEASE DO NOT USE YOUR HORN." Great trees rustled in the evening breeze, velvety-green lawns were all around; in the distance there was the babble of running water. It was hard to believe that we were in a compound at all, and not in the cathedral-like atmosphere of a great forest.

"Mr Wright, Sir?" said the smart Pakistani guard in answer to my inquiry—how nice to hear English spoken again! "Just on the left, Sir. In the trees—there."

An oasis in the middle of the desert, we thought somewhat exaggeratedly, the Embassy has put its arms around us.

3rd-6th July. Teheran

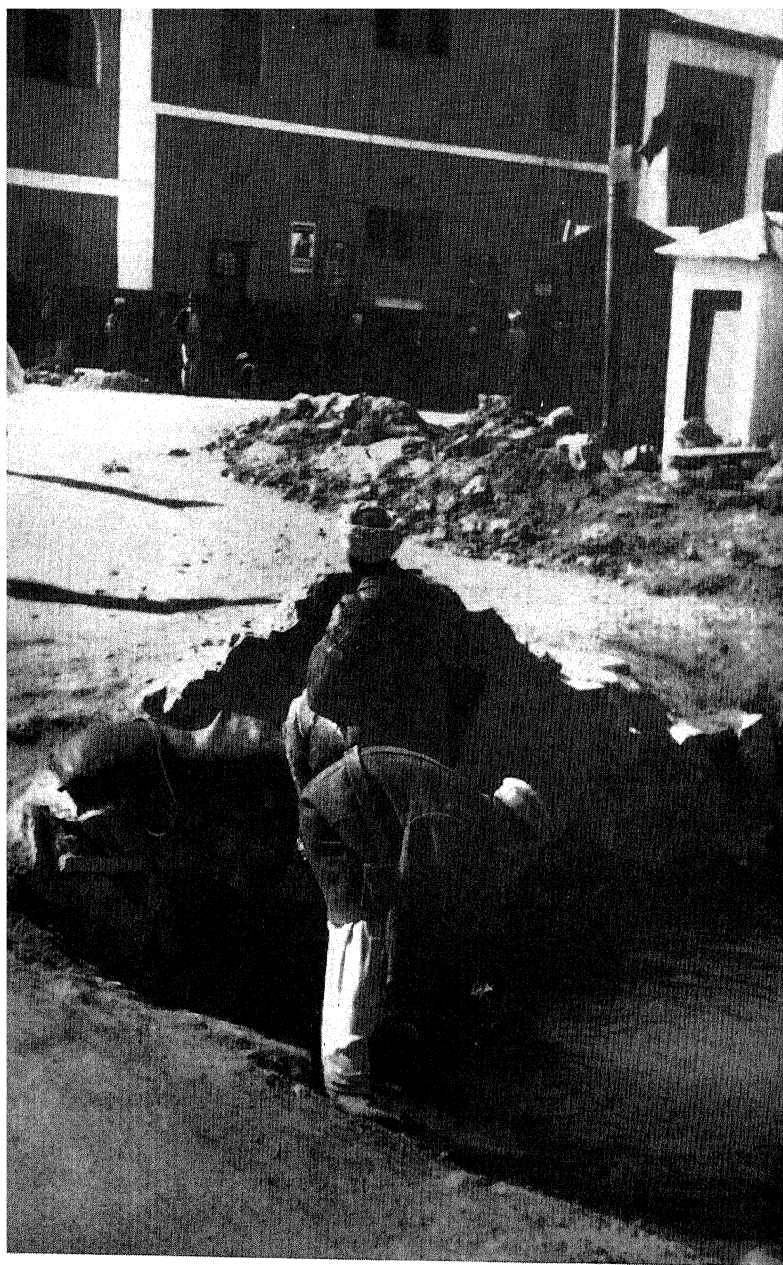
Notwithstanding the mixed metaphor of yesterday, that was just how we felt. To think that we have only been abroad a fortnight—we should be ashamed! Still, there can be no doubt that the kindness of Mr and Mrs Wright and of Tim Marten, who have split the burden of keeping us, would be almost overwhelming if they were not such good hosts. We

have had a wonderful time here—a party just about every night, or else a film show. We saw *Scott of the Antarctic* this evening, and afterwards I thought I detected a slightly accusing look here and there. Why were we not doing this instead of going in luxury to where it would be nice and warm? Perhaps it is just because of the way we are so well treated that I feel a little guilty. One of the great amenities here is having copies of *The Times* to read. Turning up the back numbers we were surprised to come across the Cambridge Tripos Examination results, and we learned that we had all passed. A fortunate thing—we had all but forgotten about them!

During the days there is also plenty to do. The car has been in the Embassy garage, as its springs are not holding up very well to our overloading, and we fill in the time by either calling at the Afghan Embassy, visiting the bazaar or swimming in the invigorating cold water of the Embassy swimming-pool. The Afghans had little to offer us beyond a letter of recommendation to the Customs, but it was well worth the visit if only for the ride in a taxi to get there. Teheran taxis are cheap—ten rials, or about a shilling, takes you anywhere inside the town. Such cheapness is not acquired for nothing, however. Whether these cars are German, British, Russian or American, whether they are five months old or five years, they all have the lean, battered, businesslike look of a destroyer steaming into port after a year of the Battle of the Atlantic. The one we took, a German car of uncertain years, was a veteran of many combats, and the driver showed us how it worked with no small pride. There was a loose connexion in the horn, and this ensured that it would start blowing at the first bump, and it would then go on blowing until the next bump, when it would stop. The driver explained that hooting was forbidden in Teheran, and each time the horn started, he would reach under the dashboard and start tearing wires out by the roots with both his hands, whilst at the same time steering with his nose. Startled, and later frozen with



In the Hindu Kush (i): A ruined stronghold guards the road



Filling a sheepskin from a *jui* in Kabul

fear, we regarded this display of virtuosity with as objective an admiration as we could muster.

We also wandered round the bazaar in the morning, looking at the mixture of new and old that it presents. Teheran itself is more or less a modern town, if rather shoddily built, but the bazaar, with its curious vaults and its misty atmosphere, its aromatic smells and its strange cacophonies, offers a peculiar picture of gradual but certain Occidental encroachment on the traditions of the East. Next to the merchant selling carpets is a stall where the latest cheap Japanese cloth is for sale, and made-in-Sheffield knives, American electric torches and German needles are sold from an alcove where, fifty years earlier, an identical merchant might have been selling opium or Hamadan pottery. It is also rather strange to hear oneself accosted in English here by the occasional vendor who thinks that he has found a tourist with money to throw away.

When we returned from the bazaar we were met by the Consul, who had our passports for us, complete with exit visas.

"How you got in I don't know," he said, "and neither do the Teheran police. Your entry visas were valid for the airport here and for nowhere else. Still, all's well that ends well. . . ." Looking very busy, he hurried off.

Our stay in Teheran certainly has ended well. It has been most enjoyable, thanks to our very kind hosts, and we shall all be more than sorry to leave tomorrow morning.

7th-8th July. Meshed

There seemed little point in writing much yesterday, as there was really very little to say. We left Teheran at five in the morning, drove all day, firstly through some beautiful wild mountains with dizzy hairpin bends, where we also saw a few nomads in their black tents, and then along the fringe which separates the Elburz mountains to the north from the great waste of the Dasht-i-Kevir to the south. This plain—it

name means simply "the Plain of the Salt Desert"—stretches unbroken for several hundred miles to the south, quite empty and almost completely barren. A shimmering heat-haze covers it by day, and by night it is still very hot. We travelled for two days along this thinly-cultivated fringe, with the brown of the Elburz, steadily diminishing in height, to our left, and the desert to the right. We found that we could trundle along quite comfortably at forty-five miles per hour, so that we escaped the worst effects of the corrugations on the road.

Today we stopped to have luncheon by a small mill, mostly situated underground. The man inside was perfectly aware of our presence, but stayed at work until we had finished eating, when he emerged and made it clear that he had something to say. We gathered round, eager to hear a communication of obvious importance. The man waited until we had settled down, and then pulled out a metal container. He opened it and shook out a few gummy-looking brown fragments.

"*Teriak*," he said. "Opium."

We bent closer to see. Pleased with the effect, the miller then pointed to a black quarter-moon of dirt under his finger-nail.

"*Intor shoma ra mikushad*—this much would kill you," he explained.

We looked suitably impressed as he worked up to his closing coda. He indicated the last joint of his little finger.

"*Intor baraye man*—I have so much."

Perhaps we looked less impressed than we felt, or perhaps he did it for effect, but with a loud "*K-h-h-h-h*" he then vanished into his burrow, leaving us to carry on along the desert.

We arrived at Meshed, the Mecca of the Shia Muslims, late that evening, and made straight for the British Consulate-General. This has actually been shut down since the oil troubles, but the Embassy in Teheran sometimes let travellers stay there in order to make some use of the building. We

drove up to the enormous great gate with its defaced Royal Arms above it and nothing but the word "Consulate" remaining from the time of the anti-British riots, only to be instantly surrounded by a very large and voluble crowd and some twenty policemen. Meshed is a town that seethes with rumours—it is one of the big spying centres of the Middle East—and it appeared that the latest rumour was that the British Consulate-General was opening up again. We got the impression that they would have been glad if this had been so. It was not long before Hans Raj, the Pakistani caretaker, had met us and told us to drive round to a side door, having first shaken off the crowd. This we did by driving round a few blocks, and soon we were in the compound. A fleeting glimpse of vast gardens and white houses, and we were in bed.

9th July. Somewhere near the Afghan frontier

We saw over the Consulate this morning. I think the Consul and his staff must have been comfortable here in Meshed. The compound would do credit to a full-size embassy, being about two-thirds the size of the one at Teheran. The Residence is a huge white building with an entrance hall big enough for a ball. The whole stands in a very lovely garden around which are six or seven other residences. To one side is the swimming-pool. When occupied it must have been a splendid sight. Now, alas! what was once a well-tended garden is overgrown with weeds, the roses grow wild and the grass needs cutting. The plaster on the houses is cracked, the wallpaper is peeling and in one place a balcony has collapsed. This compound, such a witness to the power of the British Empire, has in the space of four short years gone to decay.

Bidding farewell to Mr Raj at midday, we started our last full day of travel before Afghanistan. After Meshed the country really does seem to be the middle of nowhere: there is almost nothing to be seen for miles, and in the few villages the women were wearing national costumes and were unveiled. There was no problem about choosing a place to camp.

At a preordained hour the driver simply turned a right angle to the left, drove for a few hundred yards and stopped. We turned on the car wireless.

From four thousand miles away, the calm voice of a B.B.C. announcer came over the air as if he were next door.

"And now here are the sports results. . . . This afternoon at Lord's, Eton beat Harrow by thirty-eight runs. . . ."

Lord's! What nostalgia the thought awoke. The B.B.C. had carried us over to another world, of grey top-hats, morning coats and cricket; of baths, of martinis, of dances at the Savoy. In our isolated camp, for the first time England began to seem very far away, and for the first time we began to talk about the time, still three months away, when we would return. A rather pleased look on Chris's face when he heard that his own school had won reminded John and me that we must try and look suitably depressed at our side's defeat. Still, whatever the result had been, someone would have been pleased.

10th July. Afghan frontier

Today we rose fairly early, and with a feeling of some anticipation, for at last we were to leave Persia and enter the country which had filled our minds for the last six months. We drove for a few hours to the town of Yusufabad, which is where the Persian Customs are to be found.

"To be found" is the right phrase, as there would have been no difficulty in driving straight through. We had to ask several times; we came across a rusty old sign in the main street, which read "*Douane*" and pointed straight at a very solid wooden gate. We hooted until half the gate was thrown open by a Persian soldier, who seemed surprised at our evident wish to enter his sanctum. After some consultation with someone inside he threw open the other half, only to bang both halves hurriedly shut again as soon as we were inside the court.

The Customs were very quick, as the man was obviously

in a hurry to get back to bed; he banged away with a rubber stamp at the *Carnet de Passages*, commented upon the dirty state of the guns, the car and ourselves, shouted for tea and disappeared, leaving us alone in the court with one soldier. We asked him if we could go. He told us that we could not, saying "*Nah*", and nodding his head as if he meant "yes". We asked him what we should do. He told us that the Passport Officer would be along soon, and that in the meantime it might be considered civil if we were to call on the Chief of Police. Could we go to see the Chief of Police?

"*Nah*."

However, he finally sent for an escort of four soldiers who marched us over to the police station. Here they thanked us for calling on them—it seemed to be a matter of protocol—and made out a special form on which to enter our names and various other details. Satisfied, they then put the completed form in a drawer and sent for the escort to march us back.

We were met at the Customs shed by an apologetic man in a waistcoat. The Passport Officer was indisposed today, he explained, but in his absence he, the man in the waistcoat, would be delighted to arrange for the necessary exit formalities, as he could read and write a little. I went into the office with him. There was no window, and the paraffin lamp shed a smoky yellow glow over the two chairs and table which, with a cupboard, was all that the room contained. He picked up my own passport first, and thumbed through it, obviously intrigued by the stamps it contained. Finally we came across the Persian visa. Putting the passport down so that it would receive the full benefit of the lamplight, he began very slowly to read. Finally he looked up with a sweet and confident smile.

"*Eliour*?" he asked brightly.

"I . . . don't understand."

"*Esm—i—shoma* . . . your name . . . *Eliour*?"

"No. *Dobâyer*." (Such was the Persian transliteration of my name.)

He looked at the passport again. There was something

wrong, and he had no intention of making a slip in the absence of the Passport Officer.

"*Balé Olorver?*"

"No."

"*Oliverour?*"

I understood. He was trying to read my Christian name, not my surname.

"*Yes.*"

"*Eleruver?*"

"*Yes.*"

The man in the waistcoat looked again at my passport and scowled horribly, and then looked up with a fearful frown.

"*Oli—revolver?*"

Ah, I thought, he knows about our guns.

"It's a Browning automatic pistol actually," I told him.

"*Otomatic-pistol?*" The frown deepened for a moment, until he saw the solution. He had tricked an English spy called Automatic Pistol, who was trying to pass himself off with the quite ludicrous name of Oliver, into revealing his true identity. An English spy, but an English spy who was leaving Persia, and who must be encouraged to carry on his nefarious activities elsewhere. Slowly, laboriously, he began to write . . . "*Otomatic-pistol,*" he muttered to himself as he entered it against my passport number in the book, in the column headed "*Names*". He would see to it that we did not remain on Persian territory one minute longer than was absolutely essential, and dealt with the rest of the passports as quickly as his writing speed would permit. Whether some Central Registry in Teheran will ever associate the names of Bolor, Tomsî, Estet and Otomatic-Pistol with whatever they wrote in the book at our entry I do not know, but it seems highly unlikely.

Chapter Three

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

THE soldier unbarred the great wooden gate and flung it open; as we went through, he gave us a wave which might have been a salute. We turned right out of Yusufabad and bounced along the track which leads to Afghanistan.

We were soon bouncing over a completely empty plain. Behind us were the low sand-dunes of Persia, ahead we could just see some mountains looming up through the haze; above, almost directly above, and beating down with a ferocity unbridled by any clouds, shone the great pale yellow ball of the sun; around us there was only the emptiness of parched earth shimmering in the heat of midday.

It was about half an hour later that we saw a hut in the distance, and as we drew closer we saw that the hut was situated near to a low barrier drawn across the track. Dutifully we drew up and waited with some excitement for our first Afghan to come out and meet us. Nothing happened, so we blew our horn. The sound was lost in the emptiness around us. We blew it again, then yet again, startling a few huge birds into sudden and raucous flight. Still the hut disgorged no occupant, and lay in the same baleful silence in the stifling heat. Looking at it a little closer, we saw that what might have seemed at first sight to be a newly-built frontier post was in fact no more than a half-completed mud building which was already beginning to show signs of decay. The windows were empty holes like eyeless sockets; the doors were off their hinges; and the walls were already falling down. We realized that there was nobody here to lift the barrier for us, so we lifted it ourselves, and entered Afghanistan.

It was an anti-climax, but such a supremely skilfully-timed

anti-climax that we could not help being impressed. Instead of the wild tribal soldiers with antiquated guns and great bandoliers of ammunition, instead of the sudden disappearance of the track into nothing, instead of the violent transition from the twentieth century to the fifteenth—we had expected all this—we saw exactly the same desert, the same sky, the same sun and the same purply-brown mountains. No one stopped us to inspect the car—no one even knew about us. For the moment, we were in a sort of Nirvana. For the moment bureaucracies had no knowledge of our existence, and therefore we did not exist.

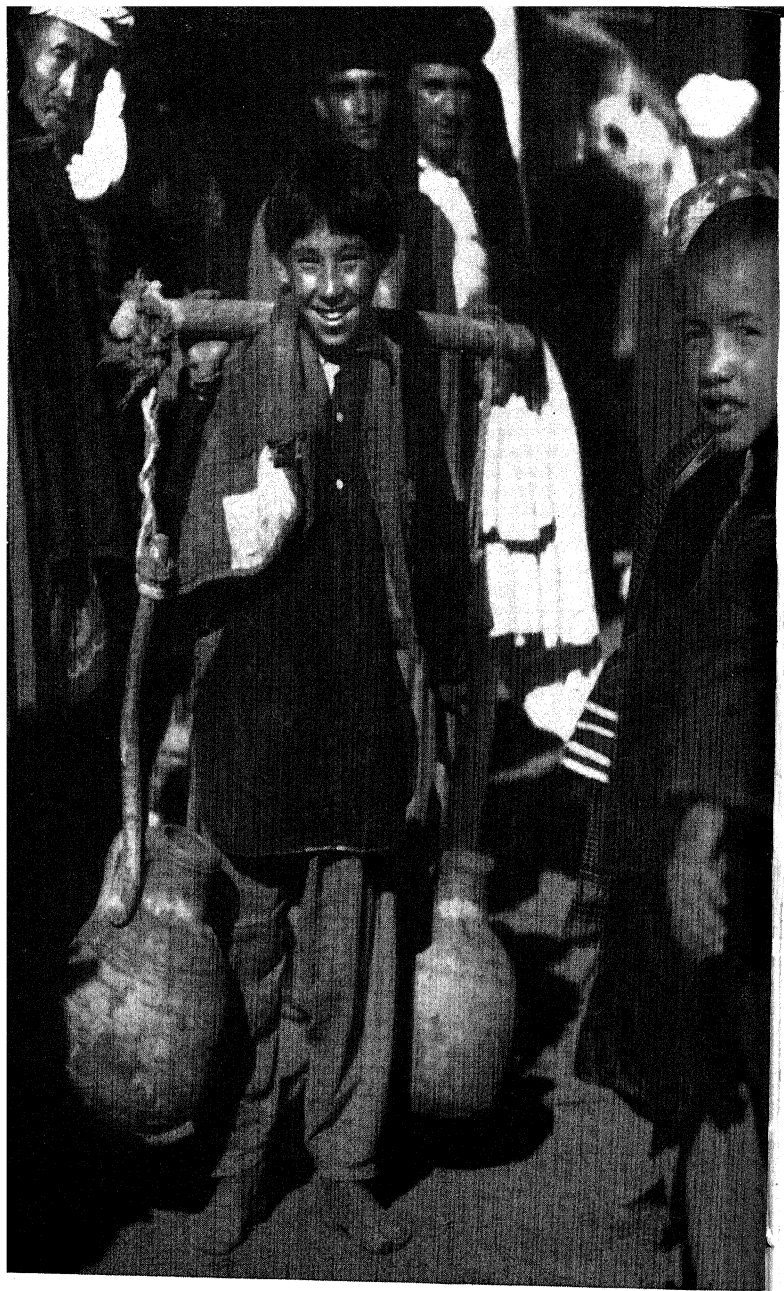
This state of affairs lasted for another twenty minutes, during which we bounced on eastward. We then arrived at the border garrison of Islam Qal'a, a fort situated in the middle of this emptiness. It was here that we had been told we should find the Customs house and the various offices which deal with the admission of foreigners into a country. Accordingly we drove into the fort and parked opposite a pile of electric refrigerators which had been imported from the U.S.A. and were now, it seemed, being left in the open, as all good furniture should be left, in order to weather.

A man came out of the building to greet us. He looked very different from the Persians we had left an hour previously, being dressed in baggy white trousers, an old waistcoat over an older shirt, a *lungi* or turban, and with no shoes; but he spoke the same language. He was delighted to find that we could understand him, and with that gesture, so characteristic of Eastern Customs houses, and which seems to imply "This is going to take a long time; but time is plentiful, so why should we not make things as pleasant as possible?", he drew up chairs for us and ordered tea.

A polite conversation started, which had nothing to do with the immediate business of Customs. Our passports had been demanded of us so gently that we parted with them as a patient under an anæsthetic might part with some frostbitten toes, hardly realizing that they were being removed; and we



Kabuli youth in a Karakul hat



A seller of *dukh* in the Kabul Bazaar

sat down to talk as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do on entering a Customs house. We discussed England—"Do you have camels in England?"—and Russia, which we were told was not a popular country in Afghanistan. We sympathized, offering the man a cigarette. Not to be outdone, he pulled out of his pocket an identical tin—"Benson and Hedges Super Virginia Cigarettes"—and we exchanged smokes. We came off worst, for whereas our tin had in it the cigarettes which its maker had put in it, his held an assortment of vilely strong weeds full of dark, juicy, black tobacco, put in the tin *pour faire le snob*.

His pleasure at smoking English tobacco, however, made us forget our own smarting eyes, and soon he had launched into a subject very near to his heart. It was impossible to contradict, impossible even to slip a word edgewise into the catalogue of villainies which we heard imputed to Pakistan. By all accounts, Pakistan was a state endowed with the wicked intent of Chenghis Khan coupled with the evil mind of a Borgia and the cunning of a wolf. Nothing would satisfy these land-hungry people but to swallow up the whole of Afghanistan, whose poor population was already suffering so much from economic blockade. We forbore to comment, as, if he had chosen, he could easily have prevented all our photography by sealing up our cameras: Afghans were to us an unknown quantity.

Gently, by easy stages, yet inexorably, the subject of conversation was forced round to our *Carnet de Passages*. "Oh yes . . .," he agreed regretfully. "Yes." Without so much as looking at it, he tore out the appropriate page and initialled it. Soon, we were asking him if we might be allowed to inflict upon ourselves the torment of parting from his company. He replied that the thought was more than he could bear, as the police were still reading our passports. Since we must be tired (the emphasis was on *must*), there was, by a fortunate coincidence, a *mehman-khaneh* (guest-house) just opposite, where we might take luncheon, and where we

might await the termination by the police of their very necessary duties. This seemed a good idea. It was hot in the sun.

Because we had harboured no small apprehension as to the style of accommodation of a *mehman-khaneh*, we were pleasantly surprised to find a spotlessly clean, cool hut, whose tiled floors were covered with large and pleasing rugs. There was even a room with a bath and plumbing—which, of course, did not work—and the final surprise of a bar of soap. We ordered tea and boiled eggs, and congratulated ourselves effervescently; a hundred yards away, unseen men in the police station did mysterious things to our passports.

It took nearly two hours for our simple meal to arrive, but our ebullience had not yet evaporated; even when we had to pay the outrageous price of ten shillings we did not worry. By three o'clock we had left Islam Qal'a with the same lack of ceremony with which we had entered.

* * * *

Bounce, bounce, *bounce*; bounce, bounce, BOUNCE; the banging, new then, to which we were to be quite hardened by the time that it had destroyed our shock-absorbers four days later, made us realize that we had indeed reached another country. Everything was the same, except the surface of the track. We went on, without seeing a soul, over the desert, over the quaint bridge with its Gothic arch that spans the Heri river, until the moment came to which we had been looking forward: our first Afghan town. Herat.

Our first impression was reassuring: a great new petrol storage tank shining in the sun. At least they had petrol here. It was reassuring, that is, until we saw lying beside it the hulks of some broken-down Russian combine harvesters, looking exactly like a Soviet cartoon out of *Krokodil*. We were told that in order to buy petrol we should first have to obtain a permit from the Governor and that we should go into the town as soon as possible.

We went on along a road between tall cypresses until we

came out at the crest of a hill which dominated the town. To our right we could see what looked like a great village diffused and spread out over many square miles of the country. In the foreground was the dome of the tomb of Shah Rukh, looking like a blue tangerine—but a tangerine whose skin of mosaic had been partly peeled off, leaving only the unsightly clay underneath. Nearby was a group of four pillars—the Musallah—which must at one time have also been covered with mosaic, but which were now in ruins. We did not spend long looking at this gloomy and desolate reminder of Herat's former glory, and so headed for the town.

On entering, we felt that what we had heard about Afghanistan's being several hundred years behind Persia had been confirmed. The roads were unsurfaced and lined with fruit-stalls. In a town nearly as big as Cambridge, there was not a car to be seen. Policemen standing at cross-roads seemed asleep at their posts as the few *droshkis* (horse-drawn taxis) clip-clopped past them on either side of the road tinkling their bells. All was quiet in the late afternoon sun; the silence was broken only by the bells of the *droshkis* and the twittering of the crowd that materialized and gathered to stare at our car.

The bystanders all knew where we wanted to go. "Park Hotel" sounded very pleasant, as we had been told of the excellence of Afghan rest-houses, so, our minds all running along roughly the same lines of long gin-and-lime, we followed the directions given until we drove into the garden of the hotel itself.

The manager came out to greet us, shaking everyone warmly by the hand. He was plainly expecting us: we later learned that they had telephoned from the frontier to let him know that we were coming. No, he was afraid that there was no gin—it was forbidden to have any form of alcohol in Afghanistan, and no lemonade, for lemons were out of season. We could, however, have tea. No, he was very sorry, but the Governor was not signing any more that evening, and we would have to wait for our petrol coupons until tomorrow.

Was not the Herat hotel nice? He entered on a recital of its merits, from the running water to the spring beds; he had just started a dissertation on the cuisine when we became aware of a disturbance.

Rich transatlantic curses were being poured out in a fruity Californian accent somewhere in the hotel, and it was not long before a thick-set man of about thirty emerged, holding an Afghan servant by the scruff of the neck.

"I've been tellin' you to bring me hot water for the last two hours, you son-of-a-bitch. Bring AB-E-GARM, will ya? And quick. ZUD. Lazy goddam louse." He caught sight of us. The torrent of good-natured abuse was cut off at source as his face creased into a broad grin.

"English?"

"Yes. American?"

"Yeah. You the guys from Cambridge we been hearin' about?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"Oh, this guy," he pointed at the manager, "got a call from the frontier about you. Once you're in, they follow you with a telephone everywhere you go. He's a spy as well as the hotel manager; he speaks a little English, DON'T YOU, ABDUL?"

Abdul's face was impassive.

"I guess he does understand. Still, if you've got anything *confidential* to tell me, just talk Brookline. *Like dis. God-damn—in' Af-ghans, I t'ink dey're da lousiest punk in da woild.* See, Abdul's annoyed. He can't understand. Say I guess I been talkin' too much. I'm from the University of California. He is from Harvard." He pointed to another American who had just come up.

"How do you do?" We introduced ourselves.

"Glad to know you."

It transpired that they were on research into a Mongol tribe which was supposed to exist near Herat. They had come in a few weeks earlier and were waiting with monumental patience for permission to come through for them to leave

the hotel. It had to come from Kabul, from where it was not expected for another few days. They told us that if we cleared out quickly we would beat the telephone system and could set out without being stopped along the northern road which goes next to the Soviet frontier. If we stopped for the night we would have to let the Governor know which way we were travelling and he would make us go by Qandahar, a much less interesting route. Fortunately, we had enough petrol with us from Persia to see us over another two hundred miles, when we could apply again.

We paid for the tea that we had been drinking as we waited for night. Bidding good-bye to our new friends and wishing them luck, we set out, our nerves slightly on edge because of some rather harrowing—and possibly exaggerated—stories that we had been told of the police system.

It was not long before we had a rude shock. After driving for a few miles in our usual cloud of dust the driver jammed on the brakes as hard as he could. Before us, distorted by the glare of headlights and wreathed in billowing eddies of dust, was the figure of a soldier, eyes glaring, teeth bared, and with a long bayonet pointing straight at us. Whistles blew, and in a matter of seconds we were completely surrounded by similar shadowy figures who in the distorted light looked like war-posters of the Japanese Army. Swallowing hard, one of us asked the way north, to Qala-i-Nao, our next town. To our considerable relief the surrounding circle parted and we were waved back on to the road. We had blundered into an Army barracks. Chastened by this display of nervousness on the part of the Afghans, we drove on until we found a place to camp.

For the next day or so we were driving in the little-visited but supremely beautiful range of mountains which was called the Paropamisus by Alexander the Great. It is at the western end of the Hindu Kush, but is probably not as rugged as the main range. The red cliffs rising up on either side of the road were reminiscent of the South of France, as were the clumps

of scrub pine. Only the smell of the sea was absent, or the delusion could have been complete. There was no motor traffic about: indeed, we could go for many miles during which the only sign of human life would be the occasional cluster of black tents belonging to some nomads or *kochis*. These tents were well known a long time ago, in days when the *kochis* were feared as bandits and robbers. They still seemed very wild as we passed them, but we were told that they had largely given up robbery unless it was perfectly safe. They looked at us with no small curiosity as their big dogs—the very virile relations of the effete animal which is known in England as an Afghan hound—rushed at us with horrible growls. These dogs are very strong and healthy, for the *kochis* seem to care for them well; they can keep up with a car moving at over twenty miles per hour for a surprising length of time. Their ears are almost non-existent, although we could not tell whether this was natural or due to the constant fights which they have.

It was not possible to go very fast in these mountains: the surface of the road—quite the worst we had seen so far—and its constant twistings, together with a great deal of climbing, made a hundred miles in a day a reasonable average, and we began to readjust our ideas of time. We had hoped to cover the eight hundred miles to Kabul in three days, but it soon became obvious that the time taken would be nearer ten; it also became obvious that we were consuming far more petrol than we could afford, and that our stock taken from Persia would not last us to Maimana, where we were told that we would be able to get some more.

On arrival at the next town—Qala-i-Nao or “the new fort”—we found a petrol pump and pleaded with the caretaker to give us fuel. He explained in an almost incomprehensible argot that he could not help us, indicating with a graphic gesture—a finger drawn across his throat—what would happen to him if he were to let us have some without a coupon. At that moment a lorry-driver came up and to my

great relief addressed me in very passable German, offering to take me to the Governor to get a special *Erlaubnis*. The word, with its Prussian sound reminiscent of jack-boots and spurs, had an odd ring from the lorry-driver's unshaven lips, but he was as good as his word. A formal application in German was written out—"Hochgeehrter Herr Gouvernör, bitte zwanzig Gallon Benzin geben"—and duly translated into Persian. I appended my new Persian signature "Eliour Dobâyer" and we went to see the Governor, followed by the population of Qala-i-Nao, who were intrigued by my shorts.

The Governor was not in his house. The driver asked where he was. "*Telefon mikonâd*. He is doing Telephone." (The capital letter rang proudly.) We went to the Telephone, where we found the Governor conversing about us with Maimana, some hundred miles away. Tea appeared, and as soon as the telephone conversation was over I was given the full and flattering attention of the Governor.

"*Peterôl*? Yes, of course. You can have all you want. Please give me a written application—tomorrow, perhaps."

I nudged the lorry-driver, who pointed out to His Excellency that an application had already been made out—he had the honour to produce it now, for he, who could understand *almân*, had translated it and could vouch for its accuracy—and whilst the *Engliz* were not really in a hurry, it would save His Excellency's valuable time if it were to be approved now. The Governor answered with an expansive smile that nothing would give him more pleasure than to see the *Engliz* again tomorrow, and even on the next day. Qala-i-Nao had always been hospitable to foreigners, of whom it saw many—"We had a *Franzavi* a month ago, an *Amrikai* last year, and an *Olandesi* a year or so before that"—and he would like to entertain us, so that we might travel on refreshed, perhaps next week. My lorry-driver thanked the Governor for his kindness, but as we were expected in Kabul that week he felt that we should leave fairly soon. In any case, hospitality offered is as

good as hospitality accepted, I hastened to add. The Governor reluctantly agreed, and glanced at the application.

"Twenty gallons? I cannot give you that. You may have five."

Forewarned is forearmed. We needed ten gallons, but the lorry-driver had told me to apply for double that amount.

"I *must* have at least eighteen, Your Excellency. Our car likes *peterôl*."

"In all Qala-i-Nao there is not more than seven for you."

"Seventeen."

"Nine."

"Fifteen."

"Ten."

"I must have fourteen. How can we get to Maimana with less? Your Excellency will surely understand. . . ."

"We will all suffer if you take all our petrol. I will give you twelve, but no more."

"Your Excellency is very generous."

"We like foreigners in Qala-i-Nao." The Governor smiled again, shook us by the hand, and wished us a pleasant trip.

"Why on earth is there all this difficulty over getting petrol here?" I asked the lorry-driver when we had left.

"It is very simple. Before the trouble with Pakistan, we used to get petrol—very good petrol—from the Burmah-Shell Company. There was no rationing and you could go everywhere without coupons. Now, it is very difficult . . . the Pakistanis do not like our policy over Pashtunistan and they have closed the Khyber Pass to all petrol. So we have to get it from somewhere. Petrol from Iran is very expensive, so we must buy it from Russia. Burmah-Shell gave us good credit, but the Russians make us pay for what we get. I drive a petrol lorry myself. I go up to Kilif and wait for the petrol to come from Russia. Sometimes I wait two or three weeks at Kilif. Then the petrol comes and I fill up my tank with twelve hundred gallons, and for my engine I get fifty. If I go farther than those fifty gallons will take me, I run out. That is a pity,

for my twelve hundred gallons are sealed and I cannot use them, so I must leave my lorry and go to the pump which is waiting for me to deliver petrol to it. If the pump is empty, that is a pity too, and I have to go on. Sometimes it delays deliveries by several weeks. That is bad, because all our transport depends on petrol. Pakistan is making things so difficult...."

"Do you like Russians here?"

"We never see them. We have always been suspicious of Russia, but they are the only ones who will give us petrol at the price we want. It is not expensive—only fifteen *afghanis* a gallon—but it is very bad. Here we are at the pump. You will see."

We saw. An incredibly antiquated pump had to be coaxed into action by liberal applications of oil before it would respond to the energetic oscillations of its handle. Finally a purplish-red mixture began to rise in the glass cylinder, to come spewing out into the car's tank, giving off a vile sooty smell. We had been advised to filter the fluid before allowing it into the tank: after five gallons the filter was clogged and caught on the gauze there was a something shiny which turned out to be water. Chris, responsible for maintenance, paled visibly and dived into the engine where he did strange things.

Noticing our tins of food, the lorry-driver insisted on taking us shopping in the town. We were able to buy melons as big as our heads for fourpence and grapes for twopence a pound; we bought rice, and a large leg of mutton which an indescribably filthy butcher hacked off a freshly-killed sheep with a blood-stained knife and sold to us for a shilling. We comforted ourselves with the thought that we had brought pressure-cookers along. He then took us to buy *nân*, the round black loaves of gritty unleavened Afghan bread which is palatable when new but which assumes the consistency of plywood when only an hour or so old. Our purchases completed, he then offered us a treat: he wanted to "stand us

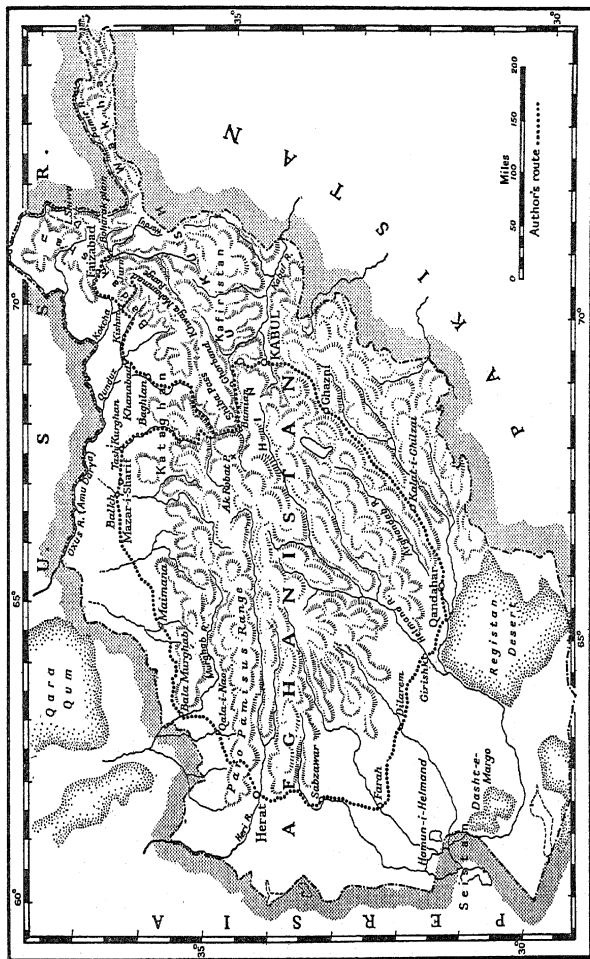
¹ About half a crown; an *afghani* is worth just over twopence.

one". We accepted and were taken along to what for want of a better word must be called the local Milk Bar: a bearded old tribesman who was sitting on the side of the road behind a row of clay pots turned black with age. "*Mast*," explained the lorry-driver. We looked into the pots: there was yellow *mast* and brown *mast*; reddish *mast* and *mast* with little black Things floating in it; there was thick *mast* and thin *mast*. Choosing the least noxious-looking variety, we were handed mugs of a whitish, icy-cold brew, and were surprised to find it quite palatable, for *mast* turned out to be no more nor less than yoghurt. However, the unpleasant circumstances under which it was served made us gag slightly before finishing it off as quickly as possible and returning to the car, thanking our friend effusively.

After Qala-i-Nao we went over a beautiful pass some eight thousand feet high; soon the country gradually began to level out into a series of low sandy hills and we motored on, seemingly making no progress as the long hours went past, broken only by stops for meals and the two-hourly change of drivers. The next town that we had to pass through was called Bala Murghab, a name which means "Upper Birdwater" in Persian, and which caused endless amusement to the *kochi* children from whom we asked the way: they had never heard of the place, but they much appreciated the joke.

It was some few miles before this town that we spotted on the side of the road a battered Citroën 2CV with a European in it. On closer inspection he turned out to be a Frenchman, one of two journalists who had taken six months off in order to do a tour of India; they were now on their way back and their battery had given out. His companion had been lucky enough to find a lorry going to Herat four days ago and he hoped to see him back that day.

A crowd had as usual materialized from nowhere, subjecting us to the invariable dull scrutiny. The Frenchman had already made friends with some of them. He introduced us to the chief, to the chief's son, to 'Ali, to Majid, to the



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security officer and to the one girl—about ten years old—who was in the crowd.

"*Voilà la petite poule du village,*" he said. "The village strumpet. *Quatre Afghanis.*" He turned to the chief. "*Chahar Afghani, nist?*" The chief agreed, but quickly added that the girl had a brother, a boy of twelve, who would be cheaper, if we required his services. . . .

The girl's face was expressionless; she did not smile, nor did she speak, although she realized that we were talking about her. It was obvious that she had not the faintest idea of the depths to which she had been dragged at the early age of ten; we hoped that the merciful ignorance of childhood would preserve her for ever from the realization of the squalidities of village vice. It was an unpleasant thought that she would probably never marry—for no one would ever wish to marry a girl who was not a virgin—and that when she was a little older she would probably be driven away from her village, to end her life begging food of the *kochis* in return for her favours. Worse still, to think that those responsible for this possibility were her own parents, whose cupidity for a few *afghanis*, coupled with ignorance, had led them to condemn this girl before she could control her own actions.

As we stood talking, a brightly-coloured lorry stopped opposite us. Among the crowd which dismounted to stretch its legs was an obvious European, who proved to be the other Frenchman. He had brought a new battery from Herat, and the Citroën would soon be working. After a few minutes conversation—bad French mingling with execrable English—we parted, either party giving the other assurances that the road to come was far worse than what had just been covered.

* * * *

By the time we reached Maimana—the town which marked the end of the Paropamisus and the beginning of the plain of the River Oxus—we were once more out of petrol and had to go immediately to the police station. Here as every-

where we were greeted with the utmost courtesy; tea was served as the man on duty tried to persuade the telephone operator to put him through to the Chief of Police. After some ten minutes of arguing, his tone became very respectful and he handed the receiver over to me. Great was my surprise to hear the voice, claiming to be that of the Chief of Police, asking me in the level tones of an educated Englishman to come and join him at the hotel for a drink. "And do bring your friends too. It will be lovely to see you all," the voice added. Dazed, we complied with the invitation.

The hotel was like the one at Islam Qal'a—a cool building with tiled floors, carpets and abominable furniture. We entered the sitting-room, to be greeted by a most courteous officer in uniform, who ignored our somewhat shabby state and bade us be seated. He professed a great fondness for England, where he had spent some time at Nottingham University and at Scotland Yard as a trainee for the Afghan Ministry of the Interior. He was quite surprised to see us, and not a little reproachful of us for not staying in the rest-houses instead of camping by the side of the road. It was not that there were any restrictions upon foreigners, nor was there any real danger from bandits, but just here, so close to the Soviet frontier . . . We would stay, anyway, and have luncheon with him. He was so glad to see English people.

The Police Chief proved an excellent host. The food in the hotel was not really good enough, he said, so he was having some sent round from his house. Whilst we were waiting, he showed us some of his carpets—including one particularly fine Herat Turcoman, which he did not put on the floor as it was too fine. We discussed every subject we could think of to ask him about, finding him to be a mine of information on what was happening in the country; he was obviously a man marked for promotion, whose interest in his job and enthusiasm for it, coupled with an air of efficiency which we had not met very often since leaving Germany, would certainly, we thought, carry him a long way.

Finally we were called to table, to the first of the many more or less identical meals that we were to have at the hands of our Afghan hosts. There was no system of courses: everything went down on the table together. The centrepiece was a huge mound of yellowish *polau*, a dish consisting of chicken cooked with plums and spices and covered with rice which has been cooked with mutton-fat, raisins and nuts. Grouped around this impressive plateful were the satellites: plates of sliced tomato, onions, cucumber and potatoes fried in a vegetable oil extracted from nuts. There were also dishes of stewed mutton, curried meatballs and very sharp pickles; in addition to salt, there was grated orange peel and walnuts.

We were slightly dismayed at the size of the helpings which our host gave us, if greatly relieved on failing to discover any sheep's eyes or other exotic delicacies on our plates. We found that we could, with a great effort, eat enough to satisfy him. As we ate, a servant came round, filling the glasses with *dukh*, a milky drink not unlike liquid yoghourt. We were told that if we wished to avoid the illnesses of the stomach to which Europeans are so prone in the East, we must drink plenty of this *dukh*, for no one who drank it was ill afterwards. Dutifully we drained our glasses.

After the *polau* we were given fruit, *mast* and tea. The Police Chief told us that we were most unwise to travel in the midday heat; all Afghans went by night and rested by day. We answered that we liked looking at the country and thought it well worth the heat—a remark which pleased him.

By the time we had finished, it was cool enough to go on, and we left him, greatly impressed by his hospitality: this had gone to the extent of his insisting that we should stay that night at the rest-house in Andkhui, some sixty miles farther on, free of charge.

For a few miles after Maimana we were driving along a beautiful road lined with cypress trees, so reminiscent of Italy that we began to wonder if we had not come to the wrong continent. Soon, however, the character of the countryside

began to change. We were entering a completely flat and empty plain: the Plain of the Oxus. Even the people were quite different: instead of the Persian-speaking people to whom we were by now accustomed, we were often surprised to find our few words of Persian being greeted with a blank stare. This was Turcoman country, and in order to make ourselves understood we should have had to know Turki. They looked very much more like Orientals than those we had met up to now, with their long beards, slanted eyes and high cheekbones; instead of turbans the men wore skull-caps, while the women all wore plaited hair and brightly coloured dresses, as well as disdaining the uniform veils of the others.

Only a very few miles to the west was the Soviet frontier, apparently unpatrolled at that point. We wondered why this should be until we looked at the map: this was the beginning of the Qara Qum Sands, a vast empty space whose very barrenness was enough to ensure that the frontier, if violated, would swiftly claim its revenge upon its violator. We were later told that some time ago a Dutch Consul had lost his way in a sand-storm and had driven into Russia, where he had been lucky enough to be picked up by the Russian frontier guards before getting completely lost; they had held a vodka party in his honour before escorting him back to Afghanistan.

The Andkhui hotel made us very comfortable for the night—the hottest we had yet experienced—and we left early the next morning in the hope of reaching the next rest-house before the heat of the day. It was only a matter of thirty miles or so, but it took us seven hours to get there through the rolling sand-dunes. At one point we noticed with some pride that our thermometer registered one hundred and fifteen degrees; an hour later, the mercury was just touching a hundred and twenty. If we drank any of our warm water, we regretted it because we sweated it away in a few minutes; if we did not, we were soon feeling parched.

Arriving at hotels had become routine by the time we reached the next one, but we had never felt so in need of it.

We always felt slightly ashamed of ourselves when greeting the caretaker, for our own hands would invariably be cracked and filthy—a violent contrast to the beautifully clean and well-cared-for hands of the caretaker himself. It was a constant source of surprise to us to see how clean Afghans were about their person. Very rarely did I notice one with dirty hands, even a lorry-driver, and their hands were always as exquisitely shaped as one expects those of a pianist to be.

We felt that these rest-houses were worthy of note: having heard much about the lack of cleanliness in the Orient, and, having experienced the squalor of one or two Asiatic hotels, we were understandably surprised at finding the Afghan rest-houses to be so well kept. The floors in all the rooms were covered in thick rugs—not, of course, of the best quality, but far from being of the worst—and in some of the bedrooms there was no other furniture. Afghans staying in these places would bring their own bedding and sleep on the floor; there were also usually a few rooms with beds. The dining-room would have one wooden table in it, around which everyone sat; next door would be a sitting-room with arm-chairs. The bathrooms were perhaps the most pleasing thing of all, for in the villages, instead of having imported plumbing which never worked—there would be just a barrel of cold water and a ladle. The pleasure of sousing ourselves with this after a hot morning's drive can be imagined. Somehow it never seemed to be hot indoors, in spite of the fact that they did not throw water on to rush mats, as they do in the south of France, in order to bring down the temperature by evaporation. The coolness must have been due to the thickness of the mud walls.

A bed for the day—or the night—cost fifteen *afghanis*, or about half a crown; a meal would cost about six, or if one took all one's meals there the total charge was thirty *afghanis* per day. The caretakers in the less frequented of these rest-houses always showed the greatest possible delicacy, and even

embarrassment, when they had to ask us to pay. A typical conversation would run something like this :

[After a timid tap on the door, the caretaker would enter, a weak grin on his face.]

Caretaker: "You are just going, *sahib*?"

Self: "Yes. We have to go another thirty miles before sundown."

Caretaker: "I see. Do you like this place?"

Self: "Yes. I like all Afghanistan."

Caretaker (blushing furiously): "Tee-hee" . . . (Embarrassed pause.) "Oh, *sahib*, there was something . . . nothing really . . ." (Pause.)

Self: "Can I do something for you?"

Caretaker: "Yes . . . oh, not really . . ." (Shifting from leg to leg.) "A piece of paper . . .?"

Self: "Paper? Oh, our permits? Our passports?"

Caretaker: "Oh, no, *sahib*. That is quite all right. Just . . . some paper . . . your rooms. . ."

Self (understanding): "Oh." (Awkward pause before bringing out the horrid, the direct, the blunt, squalid word.) "Money?"

Caretaker (frightfully relieved): "Tee-hee. Yes . . . yes, please, *sahib*, if it isn't too much trouble. . ."

A few *afghanis* would change hands. They never accepted tips for themselves, so we had to give them cigarettes, of which they never took more than one or two unless very hard pressed to do so. Accustomed as we were to the open palm of London outstretched, it was a great pleasure to have to do with people whose manners were naturally so beautiful.

It would doubtless horrify an archæologist to learn that we drove through Balkh—the ancient Bactria, and a centre of culture of many years ago—in the middle of the night without even stopping, but that is exactly what happened. However, we had been told that Balkh was totally razed by

Chenghis Khan in the thirteenth century, so we did not see any point in stopping to look at a few mounds; our decision was later approved by a member of the French Archæological Mission, who told us that in every way Balkh was a disappointment.

As we drove through the villages on the way to Mazar-i-Sharif, we would wake up the entire male population, who slept on piles of rugs on the porches of their houses just by the street. They would look up and curse as the cloud of dust stirred up by us settled on them, but they never failed to give an answer to our inquiries about the route.

We had no difficulty in finding the hotel in Mazar-i-Sharif, where we arrived very late at night. Next morning, we discovered that, in addition to the fact that we had four broken shock-absorbers, we also had a broken spring. This enabled us to spend a whole day looking at the town whilst Chris took the car to the bazaar to be mended.

The system for repairing cars is interesting: all garages belong to a Government-owned company, called the *sherkat-i-servis*, which in theory has a complete monopoly of repair work. In fact, however, the prices charged by the *sherkat-i-servis* are so astronomically high, and the work is so badly done, that a host of free-enterprise concerns have illegally sprung up. In any Afghan bazaar in a town of any size there are always a number of highly specialized shops, each dealing with one particular aspect of the car's "innards": thus there are spring shops, bulb shops, wheel shops, gear shops and many others. The parts sold are usually obtained by pilfering—how one can pilfer a gearbox defies imagination, but we were told that it had been done—and the profit of these shops is therefore very high. Their charges are reasonable and everyone is well satisfied with the system, for the driver of the car from which a part has been removed can easily recoup the loss involved in the repair by selling a door, a headlight, or some other non-essential part of his vehicle. A brand-new

lorry is in this way stripped of inessentials within a very few weeks of delivery.

The lorries are almost all American, but after a few days in Afghanistan they acquire a very un-American aspect. The coachwork is completely removed and sold. A new body, built of wood, is then added. This is made in such a way that three or four times the load previously possible can now be carried, for the back is built up to a height of ten or twelve feet, and the load-carrying part is built forward over the roof of the cab, so that what was once a streamlined lorry becomes an ungainly, square, top-heavy monster. To offset the ugliness, garish country scenes and wild birds and animals are painted all over the coachwork in bright colours. After a few religious inscriptions have been added to complete the effect, the lorry's character has become entirely Afghan, with little of its former identity.

Mazar itself is not a town of any great interest, except for the magnificent Tomb of the Caliph Hezrat Ali. The town derives its name from this tomb—for Mazar-i-Sharif only means "Sacred Tomb"—which is in the centre. It is a beautiful mosque covered with bright blue, yellow and green mosaics, looked upon with great veneration, and some five centuries old. We wandered round there to inspect it that afternoon, only to be greeted near the gate by a small and rather hostile-looking crowd. We made gestures indicating that we wanted to enter the mosque, whereupon a man detached himself from the crowd and began to chant a vicious incantation which sounded like a denunciation of all Western countries and particularly of England, and a eulogy of Russia. Meanwhile the crowd grew and muttered ominously, some of the men fingering the daggers in their belts. We thought they were objecting to our wish to go to the shrine and so we walked away, when to our great relief the crowd dispersed.

To our great surprise, when we had gone only a few yards, the same little man who had been haranguing us popped up at our side again, now all smiles and bows. So friendly was he

that we asked him again if we could go into the mosque. "Of course, of course," he said, laughing, "we like *Engliz*." We entered the mosque, where he even encouraged us to take photographs. It was well worth the effort, for it is a mosque such as I had seen nowhere except in Isfahan, with trees, pools of water and delightful shade from which to look at the mosaics. We were greatly puzzled at our friend's behaviour, and we never found any explanation for it more likely than that it was mere playful humour.

We were not sorry to leave the hotel at Mazar, for it smelt abominably—doubtless because of their having some time previously installed English plumbing, which now, needless to say, did not work—and to spend the night in the clean desert, where our peace was disturbed only by the jackals who came prowling round and made the night hideous with their yapping.

* * * *

This was, at long last, the end of the heat of the desert; it was time to enter the Hindu Kush proper. After passing through the town of Tash-Kurghan, we began to climb. Soon we could breathe again, even in the heat of the day. Our satisfaction at leaving the desert was completed by an improvement in the road and by the fact that we were able to have a swim before luncheon in one of the many swift-flowing rivers which flow into the Oxus.

We lay in the sun after our bathe long enough for one of us to become quite badly burned, as we were still fairly pale as a result of having been in the shade of the car for most of the journey. As we were oiling his back for him, wondering how it was that there were no people about, a horseman came riding up to us. He said that he had seen us curing our friend of his illness by rubbing his back for him—for see, his back was now quite unblemished—and he was wondering if we could do the same for him. He rolled up his trouser leg to show a mass of septic sores, of which one was particularly

bad. None of us was a doctor, and his leg was hardly a sight for the squeamish, but John bravely did his best with some disinfectant. The man then made a few signs indicating, it seemed, that he wanted some sort of special treatment for his big sore; he was given our largest piece of plaster and shown where to stick it. He nodded, understanding perfectly that we had given him a magic cure for his sores. He selected the only patch of his leg that was still unblemished, cleaned it carefully with some spittle on the palm of his hand, and, in spite of our objections, stuck the plaster over it, doubtless firmly convinced that its magic would soon be working. We let him go, hoping that the disinfectant would do some good, knowing at heart that it would not.

This was ignorance, the ignorance that we had already met. in other countries as well as in Afghanistan; the ignorance which led men to ask us where we came from, to nod wisely on hearing that we came from *Inglistan*, and then to ask if it was in Russia; the ignorance which enabled them to say that they liked Europeans because they had once met a German who had been kind to them; the ignorance which had led parents to sell their child at Bala Murghab; the ignorance, coupled with blind faith in our good-will, by which the operators of the petrol pumps had sometimes asked us to count out our own change from a hundred-*afghani* note, because they could not read the numbers written on their money. The people had blindly submitted to having their houses sprayed with DDT because they had been told that it was good; they had undergone injections by travelling doctors because injections hurt and any medicine that hurt must be good medicine; and now, confronted with a piece of sticky plaster, a man had stuck it on the only place on his whole leg where it could do nothing for him. We wished our medicine-chest ten times larger, and we wished we had more time, in order to teach these people what capacity for healing there was in these medicines that were useless unless used correctly.

The scenery in the Hindu Kush is magnificent, jagged and desolate. The road which leads across it was built in 1933, a feat which had baffled engineers for many years before that. Previously, travellers had crossed the Hindu Kush over such forbidding routes as the Sallang and Khawak passes, both more than twelve thousand feet high.

These passes have been used to cross the range since the earliest times, and many of the travellers who have had to use them have left behind some account of the hardships of the journey. There are several theories as to the origin of the name; the most attractive of these, if not the most probable, is that "Hindu Kush" is to be translated as "the Hindu-Killer", owing to the large number of Indian slaves who died in making the crossing.

As the Hindu Kush runs straight down the centre of the country, dividing it into two separate halves, it is not surprising that it has been the ambition of successive rulers of Afghanistan to have a good road leading through the mountains connecting the northern provinces with the south and with the capital. Various efforts by King Amanullah in the 1920s to achieve this end, with both Afghan and Russian engineers, failed, and it was not until the following reign—of King Nadir—that success was finally achieved by the magnificent engineering feat of driving the road along a river valley—in places almost a perpendicular canyon—and over the Shiba Pass, which is only some ten thousand feet high, and thence down another valley and into Turkestan.

A drive along this road is a revelation of what can be done by engineering. I have seen many of the passes in Savoy and in Switzerland, but for sheer difficult country none can equal this road, which runs for many miles on a narrow ledge with a roaring torrent some fifty feet below and cliffs, sometimes overhanging, rising many hundreds of feet above. We were later told that a British surveyor working for a company which was to install a cableway across the Hindu Kush had

worn out a pair of Army boots in ten days merely by walking around the area.

After the delightful coolness of the Shiba the countryside became slightly less rugged; poplars began to appear at the side of irrigation channels; to either side there were small fields of lush green grass, and there were more peasants to be seen.

This was to be our last night before arriving in Kabul. We had the greatest of difficulty in finding a place to camp, eventually ending up a dry ravine which was infested by mosquitoes. Shortly after we had turned out our lamps, and just as we were entering that dreamy state which heralds the final arrival of avidly-wooded sleep, we heard the approach of a band of men. I fingered my automatic nervously and pointlessly as a lantern appeared in the distance and drew closer. There were about ten of them, and their purposeful air boded more than mere curiosity. We lay quiet as they prowled about, inspecting the car, our "kitchen", our equipment and finally ourselves. They were, it seemed, the mayor and corporation of the village through which we had just passed, who had received an urgent telephone call ordering them to look for us, as we had not arrived at the next village. They were going to set a guard over us, to ensure that we spent a safe night. So saying, all but four went away.

The night was safe, but not restful. The four sat round talking until the morning, making sleep all but impossible with their laughing and spitting. In the morning we tried to take their photograph. The great, tough, heavily-armed men who had seemed such tigers during the night were now seen to giggle shyly and to blush like schoolgirls at the mere idea; they giggled so much and were so shy that we eventually had to put our cameras away.

We set off early, as we had allowed an hour in which to telephone the Embassy from the next town. It was not enough. Apparently the telephone that worked so well for its Afghan masters when they were following us around did not

work for us. After an hour and a half spent in the telephonist's office, drinking innumerable cups of tea whilst the operator tried to reach Kabul, we gave up. The operator spread his hands expressively. "*Momken nist*—it is not possible. Perhaps this afternoon. . . ." We drove away.

The last fifty miles led us through a heavily-populated and dusty plain. It was once more very hot, and we began to imagine what Kabul would be like. Even the most reactionary of us, who had been hoping to find a town as primitive as any of the others we had seen, at last began to admit that a hot bath and a John Collins—or even a dry martini if they had such things in Kabul—would not be too bad.

Our first view of the town from the rising ground ten miles to the north convinced us that they would not have them. It lay in the middle of a flat dust bowl, as brownish-grey as the earth around it, wrapped in a brownish-grey haze. Not a spot of green could we see, and even the river had a dull, mercurial gleam. We scanned the scene hopefully with our binoculars, trying to spot the British Embassy, only to see brownish-grey mud houses, brownish-grey streets, a few brownish-grey trees and the leaden-brown river. Our hearts sank as we drove on.

They soon rose again, for as we rounded a corner we came upon a sight that would make any Englishman happy. There, looking strangely solid and immutable in spite of its fluttering, and flying proudly above a great white wedding-cake of colonial architecture, was the red, white and blue of the Union Jack. We had, entirely by good fortune, found Her Majesty's Embassy.

The Foreign Office in London, mindful of our welfare, had instructed us to call on "Mr Dulling, the Second Secretary. He will know about you," when we arrived. Glad of an excuse to enter this fairy garden in which the wedding-cake stood, we drove past the smartly uniformed Pakistani guard, on to our first tarmac since Meshed, and so to the house indicated.

I handed in my card at the door. Within a few minutes Ken

Dulling appeared, with an expression on his face which, worthy of the highest Foreign Office traditions though it was, did not quite conceal the fact that our friend in London had failed to tell him about us, and that he therefore had little idea of who these four men who looked so unaccustomed to wearing their rather crumpled suits might be. He quickly recovered himself, falling back on the conventional formula which covers so many shocks.

“Won’t you come in and have a drink?”

Chapter Four

KABUL

THE British Embassy in Kabul—it has only just been raised from Legation status—is without a doubt the most impressive sight that the town has to offer. It was built in 1929, six years after it was first decided to have a permanent British representative there; this is perhaps surprising when one considers how much farther back into history Anglo-Afghan relations actually go. Once, when I was down in the town and asked a *droshki*-driver to take me to the "*sefarat-i-Britanieh*", he did not understand what I meant for a long time, until he finally cried out "*Ah! Bagh-i-bala*", with a relieved look on his face. *Bagh-i-bala* means "the upper garden", perhaps the best description that there could be of this most magnificent compound. It stands slightly above the town and some four miles from it, connected to it by an atrocious road, a walled-in entity of greenness in the surrounding brown. Dominating the whole compound is the Big House, the residence of the Ambassador: it is an airy white mausoleum, which we were told was very difficult to heat during the short but cold Kabul winter, but which in summer made one feel cool even by looking at it. In front of the Big House is a great drive, whilst to either side of it stretch lawns and flower-beds on a suitable scale; all of these are beautifully kept up and give the place an aspect which is almost tactlessly colonial.

Grouped around the Big House, and at a respectful distance, stand the less magnificent dwellings of the other Embassy staff, usually modestly shrouded by trees. These smaller houses could have been transplanted from Esher or Wimbledon, so doggedly suburban do they look. Here is no Oriental splendour, none of the pretentiousness of the Ambassador's residence, nor even any attempt to compromise with local

building customs: the British Embassy is British territory, and if policy dictates that one building shall be a show-piece, there is no reason why the rest of the staff should suffer, and so British houses, built in the British manner, are put up whether they be practical or not.

In point of fact it is not strictly accurate to say that the Embassy is British territory, for at present it is a bone of contention between the Indian and Pakistani governments. When it was built, it was considered more as an Embassy of the Government of India than of Whitehall, and, like various buildings in England, was built with Government of India money. Since the Partition, India has claimed that it should belong to her, whilst Pakistan, correctly contending that some of the funds came from her, has claimed her right to a stake. At present the matter is left at the passing of an occasional Note from one party or another, and so long as relations between India and Pakistan make a friendly settlement of the dispute unlikely, the Embassy will remain British. This in itself is reason enough to hope that relations will remain strained, for it is quite inconceivable that people of any other nationality should live in that uncompromisingly British compound.

* * * *

Ken Dulling was magnificent. When he had got over his original surprise at our unannounced arrival, he insisted that the four of us should stay with him as long as we were in Kabul, an invitation for which we were even more grateful when we learned that the Kabul hotel was full up. Perhaps he realized what he was letting himself in for better than we did, for we stayed there for eleven days, during which both he and his wife were our most generous hosts.

Ken's official title was that of "Second Secretary (Commercial)". However, as he said, there is not really enough commercial work to keep him occupied fully, and much of his spare time was spent on study of the local dialects. One of

his prize exhibits was a Turcoman typewriter, used for the compilation of a Turcoman grammar which he is writing. In the course of his incessant pacing up and down the sitting-room, he told us that his ambition before the Chinese Civil War had been to be the British Vice-Consul in Urumchi, the capital of Sinkiang.

"Kabul isn't really out-of-the-way enough," he said. "Too many people come here. Urumchi would have been better, or perhaps Ulan Bator."

He had already been on the Consular staff at Meshed, and was most distressed to hear of the way in which the Consulate was falling into disrepair.

Our Land-Rover was handed over for repairs to Les Palmer, who runs the Embassy garage. In addition to the frequent repairs which he does to the Embassy's vehicles, and to the upkeep of an antique Rolls-Royce which belongs to the Shah, Les has his whole time taken up by the two great green buses which make fortnightly trips to Peshawar and back. These ungainly monsters have been travelling to Peshawar for many years and are showing signs of old age, for the road between Jellalabad and the Khyber is bad enough to destroy the resistance of the most solid of vehicles: he estimated that after each return journey it took him a week to put the bus right again. As these buses are responsible, not only for the first stage of the return journey of the diplomatic bag to England, but also for transporting all the small luxuries which have come by sea from England and which are unobtainable in Afghanistan, Les's job assumes an importance almost on a level with that of the Ambassador himself.

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From our arrival at the Embassy to the time when we left, our life divided into two completely separate halves: the one quiet, retiring and European, amongst the small diplomatic community which seems almost completely cut off from Afghan life; the other in what seemed to be the totally chaotic

workings of an Oriental bureaucracy. It was interesting, and a matter calling for some comment, to see how completely the European-American community was divorced from the country in which they were stationed. There were many foreigners in Kabul—either diplomatic or there in connexion with any of the foreign missions in the country—and not a few had an intimate knowledge of the political situation in Afghanistan; but we met only a few—mostly British—who had any extensive first-hand knowledge of the people. The Afghan Government did not seem unduly anxious to change this state of affairs. Foreigners were welcome, but only on the Government's terms. Kabul was open to all. Other parts of the country, only vaguely defined and seemingly varying from day to day, were not. Some scientific expeditions were given many facilities, others had fewer. As the natural result of this policy, which is far from being an innovation, Afghanistan, one of the most fruitful fields for ethnographic study in the world, has frequently and deliberately been overlooked, for only the scientist who was entirely dedicated to his intentions would find the determination needed to carry repeated requests and pleadings to a successful conclusion. As we found out, he would also need time.

Our first call in Kabul was on the Press Minister, H.E. Dr Tarzi, who spoke excellent English and professed himself very glad to see us. He had done all he could to help us by having our arrival announced over Kabul Radio and by seeing to it that some mention was made of us in the Press, in the hope that this would secure us favourable treatment from the Ministry of the Interior, who were responsible for the actual issuing of permits. He himself knew all about us. So saying, he pulled out a fat wad of Press cuttings from his drawer, some of which we had not seen ourselves: we suppressed a shudder at the thought of what the provincial newspapers might have written about us, but were nevertheless most impressed at this display of thoroughness. He was very anxious that we should be given our permits, but as we were students,

he felt that the most suitable department to look after our needs would be the University, and he had accordingly made arrangements for us to meet the Rector that morning. In the meantime, he was always ready to do what he could for us.

We thanked him gratefully, and were taken to the University by Bryan White, the Third Secretary, who had given up his morning to getting our tangle sorted out.

"I don't think you have much hope of getting into Wakhan," he told us. "I do not think Dr Tarzi had very much hope for you either, but there is no harm in trying again."

A Pathan in para-military uniform ushered us at eleven o'clock into the office of the Rector. It was impossible not to experience a feeling of awe on remembering what an unthought-of thing it would be to approach the demi-Deity of his equivalent at Cambridge. However, we took some comfort from the fact that he was chatting in a very friendly manner with some students who rose, bowed to him and left the room when we entered.

Dr Askhar was obviously determined not to be an academic "tin god", and in all our many dealings with him he was invariably approachable, informal and helpful. He was also very glad to see the first party of Cambridge students to devote their attention to his country, and gave us far more of his time than we felt he could spare.

It was obvious, however, that no Government department was particularly anxious even to appear to approve an application from four foreigners to enter the Wakhan, but we eventually managed to persuade him to apply on our behalf, saying that we believed that the applications had already been forwarded from London and that all we required was an answer.

"I will apply for you," he finally agreed. "In the meantime, I hope you will make good use of the inevitable delay of two or three days before the answer comes through. I would like you to see the University, to talk to our students, to see Kabul

and also the Museum. Perhaps you will be good enough to telephone me at this office tomorrow morning, when I hope to have everything arranged."

The warmth of our parting handshakes was slightly diminished by the thought of how much longer we were going to be trespassing on the Dullings' kindness.

Bryan returned to the Embassy, leaving us to spend an hour or so looking at the town.

* * * *

The reactionaries amongst us had little to complain of in Kabul. It is true that there are a few modern buildings and a few motor-cars on the streets, but the general impression, even in the centre of the town, is that it has changed little since the time when it had an important slave-market. True, there are some four miles of surfaced streets—and Russian engineers are at present engaged in surfacing more—but even on these the main traffic is donkeys and bare-footed men, not cars. The police do not seem in the least surprised to see flocks of sheep being driven over the new bridge which spans the Kabul river, and the *droshki*-drivers show the usual philosophic attitude towards congestion of the main streets by crowds of bare-footed, be-turbaned tribesmen, all talking at the tops of their voices in any of a dozen tongues of Central Asia as they make their way to the bazaar. Every now and then one might hear the squeal of brakes as a modern American or Russian car, usually driven by a hot-and-bothered European, ground to a halt before a hen and her brood unhurriedly picking their way across the road.

Half an hour in a bouncing *droshki*—for there is only one motor-taxi in Kabul—was enough to take us to the Upper Garden in time for luncheon at two o'clock. The driver, who had been merrily talking in broken Persian about his fine horse, would at first accept no payment for the ride, but he was eventually persuaded to accept ten *afghanis*, or half the normal fare. Crossing the threshold of the Embassy brought

us back into the world of tennis—I do not think there is a tennis court in the place, but the whole compound exudes an air of tennis—of cocktails, and of Europe.

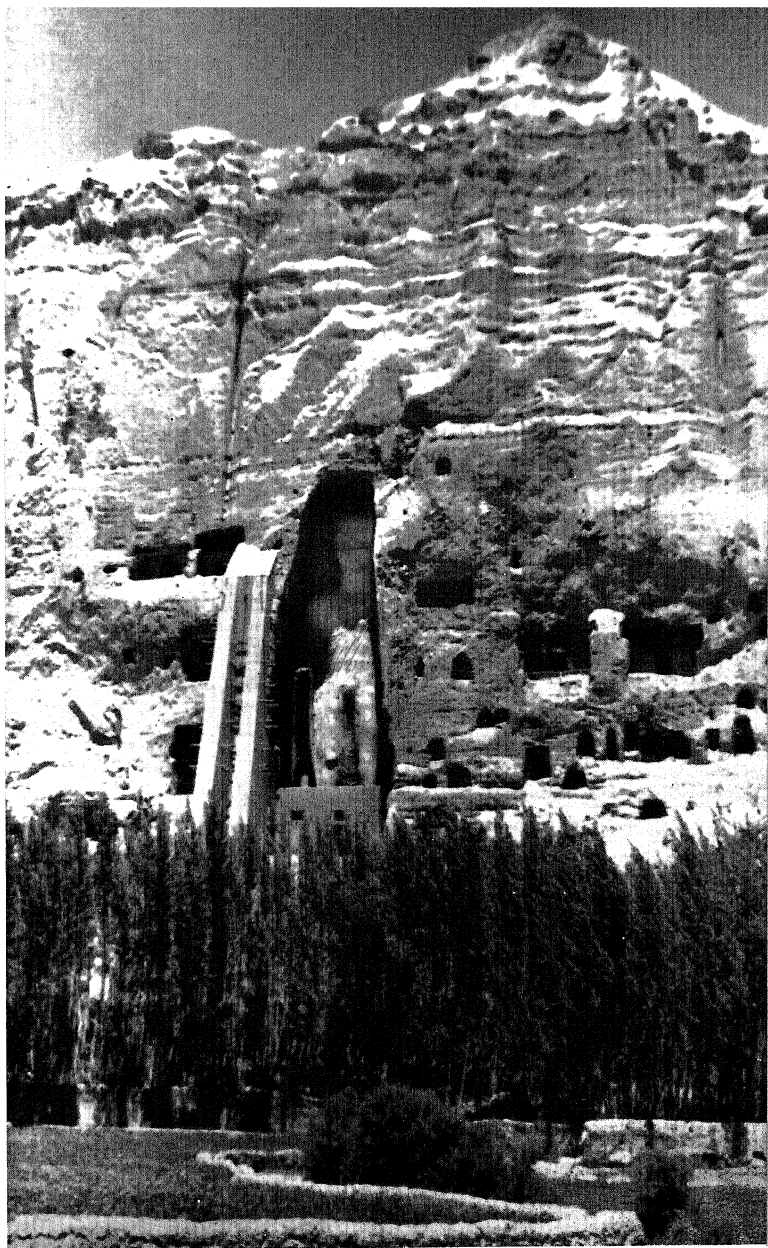
“How did you get on?” we were asked.

The answer was truthful—nothing concrete to report.

“Oh yes, that’s quite all right. You must expect that. There’s one good thing—I heard this morning that they are *definitely* going to let you go *somewhere* (though just where is anyone’s guess); you’re very lucky in a way for that—they once had a fellow here whom they kept waiting round for permits until his residence permit had run out and then refused to renew it. It’s a very tactful way of getting rid of visitors—saves them the embarrassing business of having to say no. It looks as if you might get your permits within about ten days, so you should get anything up to a month up-country. In the meantime some embassy in town is having a fish-fry tonight. I can’t remember which one it is, but you’re all invited.”

The “fish-fry” turned out to be a formal diplomatic cocktail party, at which every one of us thanked his stars that he had brought a suit and a clean shirt; it was there that Richard was introduced to Prince Daoud, the Prime Minister, who wished him good fortune. The party was in no way unusual, except that, out of deference to the country in which it was held, no alcohol was served and the guests had to drink a nauseatingly sweet pomegranate syrup instead. The Europeans there—and there were many—seemed to be making heavy weather of conversation unstimulated by wine, but valiant efforts were made, and we ourselves never felt left out of it, for new faces are rare in the European community in Kabul, and we consequently came in for much attention.

In spite of the absence of alcohol, the party did not fail to have its after-effects. There can be but few travellers who have ventured into Asia who have not at one time or another experienced the disease known, according to locality, by any one of a dozen names such as “Teheran Tummy” or “Delhi



In the Hindu Kush (ii): The small Buddha at Bamian



Men of several races mingle in the crowd at Khanabad

Tajik swimmers in the Khanabad river



Belly". "Kabulitis" is just another name for the same affliction in a particularly virulent form. Basically the disease seems to be little more than a form of dysentery; it produces excruciating stomach pains, violent diarrhoea and, if left long enough, it can be a serious drain on the energy, thus opening the way to very much more serious ills. So it was that, having all contracted it, we made haste to effect a cure. The standard remedy is Sulphaguanidine, but after it has been used it seems to lose its effect, and other medicines—of which there is a great variety in the surprisingly well-stocked Kabul chemists' shops—must be resorted to. Ringing the changes in this way, it is not too difficult to keep clear of Kabulitis, or at least to check it in its earliest stages, provided that one steers clear of certain foods.

The disease is contracted in an interesting way. Kabul, like Teheran, has no running water supply or sewerage system in the European acceptance of the terms. Water is supplied from the hills and flows through the town in *juis*, or deep ditches on either side of the streets, eventually to find its way into the river. These *juis* are bi-functional, the water in them being used both for domestic purposes and for sewerage. As a result, it is hardly surprising that disease is not uncommon; the rich buy their drinking water or have it sent from the nearby valley of Paghman, but a poor person who feels thirsty will not hesitate to drink water direct from the *jui*. One is advised to drink only tea—which is at least made with boiling water—in the town, but Kabulitis has yet another trap laid for the unwary. Throughout Afghanistan, melons are a most popular and enjoyable source of refreshment, and as they grow are a perfectly safe source of moisture. The best melons come from Mazar-i-Sharif and Turkestan, where so many are grown that they are sent to Kabul. Travelling by night, and standing by day in the hot sun, these melons are in a somewhat dehydrated state when they arrive, and owing to their wrinkled appearance would be unlikely to achieve any sale. The merchants, however, have an easy way round

this: the base of the melon is punctured in two or three places with wire and the fruit is then left overnight in the *jui*. In the morning its fat, smiling appearance is restored, ready to take in the unwitting buyer, and completely belying the fact that it has provided a comfortable home for many thousands of germs, for the holes made by the wire have swollen shut and are almost invisible. The same convenient system finds its application with almost any other fruit, and particularly with apples or cucumbers.

After some days, I felt sufficiently sure of myself to be able to telephone the University to inform His Excellency that at any rate two of us would be delighted to come on the promised tour. In the meantime, had anything been heard of our permits?

Over the crackling of the wires, now seeming close at hand, now almost unbearably far away, the Rector assured me that all was being dealt with, that we could not go to Wakhan, but that the Ministry of the Interior were studying the problem of where we should go, and only patience was called for before the time came when we should receive an answer. We must understand that all this took time. . . . However, there was a bright side to all this. The University of Kabul's medical department was available for us to see, and arrangements had been made for us to visit it that very afternoon. As it was annexed to the General Hospital, we would be able to see that too. Would that be convenient? Good. We would then come to the office at about half-past two.

We were introduced to the head of the Medical Faculty, a most charming person who had done many of his studies in England. As we drove out of the town in his car, we were treated to a long talk on health in the country and about the difficulties of training suitable staff from local sources. The Government hesitated to send students abroad, both for financial reasons and because they feared that the students would become so enamoured of the flesh-pots of the West that they would not return. Foreign staff were very difficult to find,

because they felt out-of-the-way in Kabul and were not well paid: the majority of the teachers were Germans or Austrians who, he hinted darkly, "might consider it unwise to return to their countries". These people, of whom there were many, were completely in the power of the Afghan Government, for it was the Afghan Government, not their own, which protected them in return for their services. Their work, was, however, good, and the fact that their knowledge was a decade behind the times was of little import in a country where there were no doctors at all. Another problem—perhaps the greatest of all—was the difficulty of obtaining nurses. Most of the nurses—indeed, nearly all—were male, but men did not on the whole consider this to be honourable work, particularly if called upon to work in the women's wards, where they not only objected to having to wait on what they considered as little better than cattle, but where the women objected to being seen unveiled. Women nurses were, of course, almost unobtainable, because of the difficulty of recruiting them from the villages and of persuading them to give up purdah. Indian and European women had been doing the job up to now, but only very recently news had come from Qandahar that two girls from a nearby village were undergoing training, and where there had been two, who knew how many more might come?

On entering the hospital it was impossible to avoid feeling that this very courageous optimism would be needed in order to overcome the obviously enormous difficulties which were being faced. An English hospital gives an impression of light and cleanliness; the walls are newly distempered, the windows are clean, the floor is of polished linoleum, the lights are bright and over all there is a smell of disinfectant. Nurses in starched white uniforms trip primly about, perhaps wheeling an equally sanitary-looking patient along. There is only the most restrained noise in the mansion of Hygiene.

Here there was none of this. In spite of evidently strenuous efforts that had been put into the maintenance of the build-

ing and the cleanliness of the patients and staff, in spite of efforts at discipline and order, my first recollection on entering was of when I had had to go round to my squadron barracks in Germany at six o'clock in the morning in order to take the muster parade. These parades were purely a numbers check, at which a smart turn-out was required only of the officer taking it. The soldiers would come down the stairs, unwashed, unshaven, their eyes gummy with sleep, wearing no more than a pair of socks and their pyjamas, with perhaps a sweater over the top. They looked untidy, unshaven, dirty and resentful; on being given the order to dismiss they would shuffle off in silence, hardly knowing in their semi-wakeful state where they were going. The patients in the hospital looked like these soldiers; in addition, the building itself breathed an atmosphere of an army barracks: instead of looking hygienic, the corridors and wards looked, as I had thought only army installations could look, as though immense efforts had been expended on a display of whitewash and polish in order to conceal a basic uncleanness. Even the strongly-scented disinfectant in the air could not cover the other smells—of vomit and of bodily filth. But it was a hospital, where many were being cured. Improvements were on the way.

We were taken round the various wards, where we were glad to see that the patients appeared very happy and well cared for. There was a waiting list for patients to enter the hospital—an encouraging factor, as at least their initial prejudice had been overcome. Hardly surprisingly, nearly all the patients were male: women still retained their old prejudices and it was hard to persuade even the very ill ones to come. The nursing staff were almost entirely male, and said to be very corrupt. All expenses for the poor patients were paid for by the State, including their food, but sometimes the attendants had to be given an illegal tip for bringing the food. This sort of difficulty was only one of the many which lie in the path of the medical pioneer in Afghanistan.

The research laboratories were mostly staffed, again, by Germans and Austrians, and their equipment was a bewildering mixture of Russian, German, American and British instruments. The bottles of chemicals, too, had instructions on the labels in half a dozen different languages, as did the charts on the walls. Eventually it was hoped that it would be possible to standardize on English as a language, but at present the Afghan medical student would need to know three alphabets and to have a nodding acquaintance with as many tongues in order to be able to work properly. The library at least was well stocked, with periodicals from many countries, and it was a great surprise for us to see a girl reading these; however, she eventually turned out to be the Austrian librarian—women are not yet encouraged to read medicine in Afghanistan.

The Head of the Medical Faculty had one final surprise for us—his *pièce de résistance*. After an interesting if rather depressing afternoon spent tramping about the wards and the laboratories, talking to doctors and to students, and reflecting much of the optimism we saw evinced, we were led down to the basement. We halted in front of a big iron door.

"I am now going to show you something that will surprise you," the Head of the Faculty said, flinging open the door.

In front of us, in a damp atmosphere loaded with formalin, were twelve stone slabs. On each slab, looking strangely small and shrivelled, almost like the great spiders that we had killed with boiling water in Turkey, lay a naked corpse. It was hard not to pale a little, but on reflection there did not seem to be anything very surprising about these corpses. Mystified, we inspected them—they were not very unusual, dead from a number of different causes.

"You do not understand," he went on. "These corpses represent almost as important an advance as the nurses in Qandahar. You may know that the village people here—particularly the Pathans—believe that if a dead man is to ascend to Paradise in a state of physical perfection, his body

must be buried whole. That is why a man's relations will go to almost any lengths in order to bury his limbs with him if they have been cut off—it is a duty to them. It also explains why the Pathan tribesmen hand over a dead enemy's body to their women for mutilation. Well, when faced with that sort of thing it is hardly to be wondered at that we could never get hold of any bodies for dissection: we had to keep a look-out for men with no relations and for people who could be bribed—usually an expensive task. These bodies that you see here were almost all given to us voluntarily when we explained what we needed them for. Some are dead of malaria, some of typhoid, some of injuries and some just of old age, so we now have deaths from a variety of causes for our students to investigate. It may not seem very much to you from England, but I can assure you that to us it represents a very important step forward."

We left the mortuary with its foetid atmosphere, declined an invitation to see the psychiatric ward, and returned to Kabul.

* * * *

Life for the diplomatic and foreign community in Kabul centres round the various parties such as the ones we had already experienced for most of the week. On Wednesday evenings, however, there is a change. In one of the nameless streets—the streets are all nameless in Kabul, and hence addresses are very difficult to find—in the north of the town, not far from the United Nations mission and the Indian Embassy, the French have set up a club. It has been going for some years, and is normally reserved for French-speaking members—except on Wednesday evenings, when all are welcome. There is dancing, a bar, French travel posters on the walls and merriment. To enter this place on one of its social occasions is an interesting experience, for blending against a background of undulating French are the staccato of German, the lazy drawl of American, the cooing of Russian and

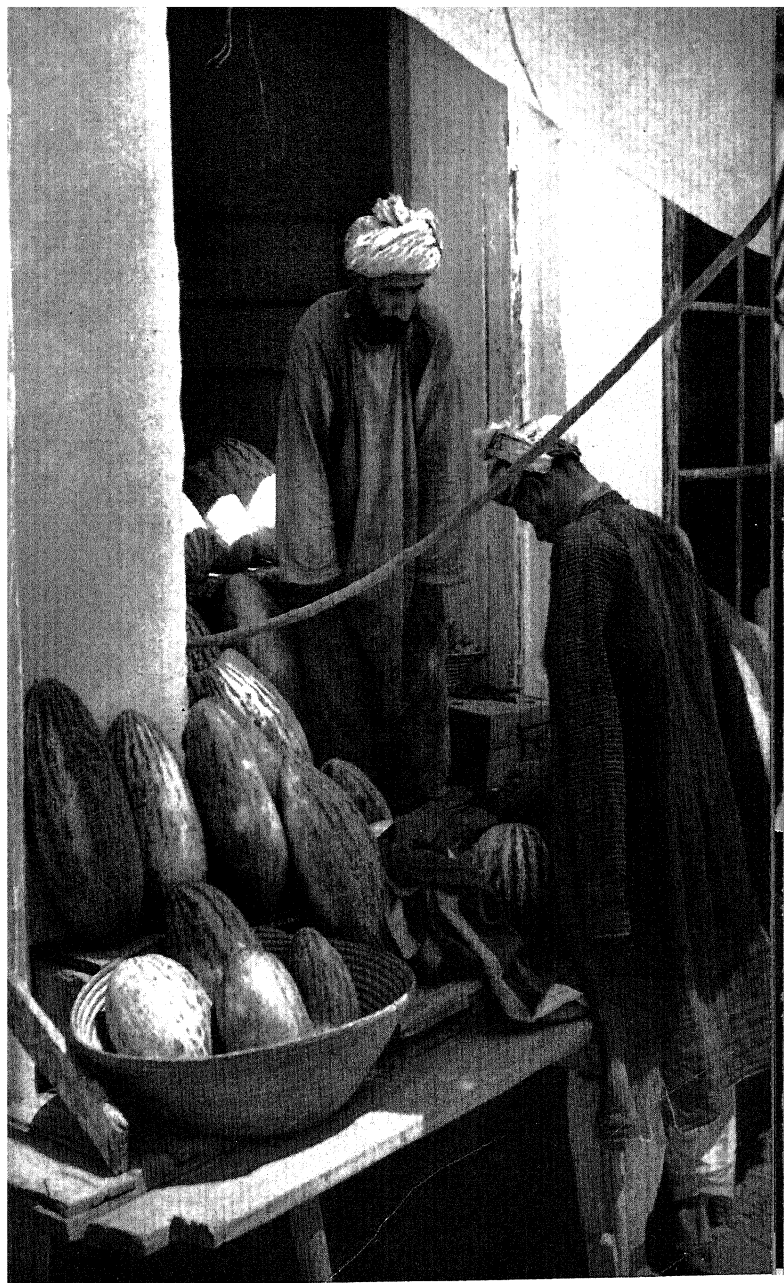
the easy flow of English, as well as the sounds of a dozen other languages. Kabul's foreign community is nothing if not cosmopolitan. Apart from the British there, now sadly few in number, there is a vast American Embassy, a rather vaster Russian one, a Turkish military mission, an enormous number of German contractors; there are Japanese entomologists, French archæologists, Czechoslovaks who seem to be there for no particular purpose but nevertheless look sinister, and even an Italian priest, the only Christian priest in the country, allowed in by special grace of the King, in return for which favour the Afghans are allowed to have a mullah in Rome. As if this were not enough, there is in addition at these soirées a liberal assortment of the polyglot staff of the United Nations mission—Dutch and Swedish, Indian and Indonesian, Burmese and Chinese are all to be seen.

The party is therefore more than a little difficult. One might start the evening dancing with a nice sensible English-woman whom one knew, and with whom one might discuss the weather, and particularly the differences between the climate in Kabul and that in Cambridge, pass on to an Egyptian who would have been vaguely introduced as "Mrs—er . . .", with whom one might talk about Farouk, look enviously at the man dancing with the French Ambassador's strictly-chaperoned daughter and end up with a Filipino lady with whom conversation was monosyllabic. Finally, someone in the Embassy would make signs at us that if we wanted to leave there was a car going up, and we would gratefully leave the heat of the party and revive in the crisp night air outside.

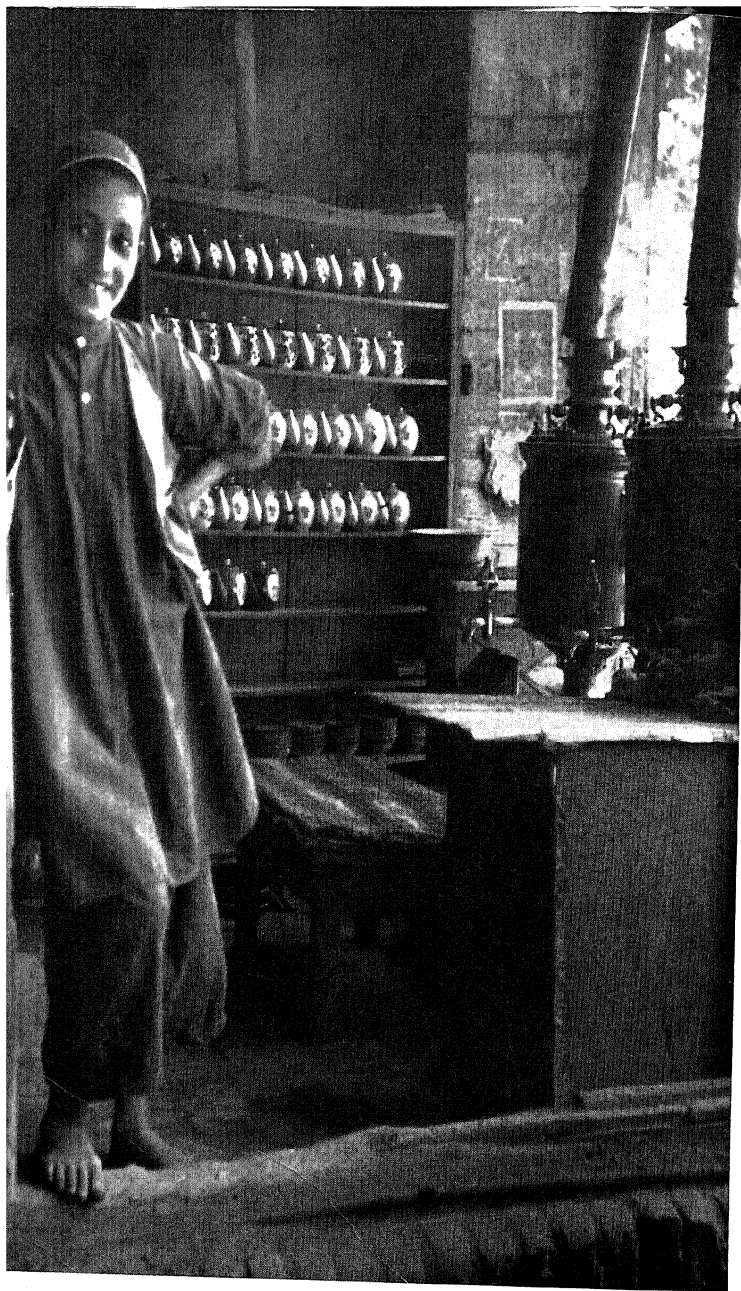
The next morning, after our usual call at the University to find that nothing about our permits had come through, seemed a good time to spend wandering around Kabul on foot. In particular, I was very anxious to buy one of the Karakul lambskin hats which are worn in town by many Afghans. A short *droszki*-ride over the unsurfaced streets brought me to the river, where I got out and walked along the embankment. Where life for the foreigner seems to revolve around

the embassies, that of the Kabulis centres on the Kabul river which more or less bisects the town. It is not an attractive river. In spring it is no doubt filled with the roaring waters of a thousand mountain streams as it comes bounding down in tawny fury to join the Indus. This was, however, summer, and the water was stagnant, as the hills that provide it with water are not very high: it was doubtless stagnant for another hundred miles, until the waters of the Kunar, fed from the eternal snows of Nuristan, should give it a new lease of life near Jelalabad. During the spring flow, a body had fallen into the waters of the river higher up and had caught on a post which supported a flimsy footbridge. The people of Kabul, fascinated by a sight which one would have expected to be all too common, had gathered on the footbridge in their hundreds to stare at the corpse. The footbridge, rightly resenting this compulsion to bear more than the two or three humans to which it was accustomed, had parted, and over a score of the spectators had been drowned. Now, had a corpse by some miracle appeared beneath the newly-repaired bridge, and had the same collapse taken place, those who had been discharged into the depths would not have needed to fear death from drowning, for under some two feet of soupy green slime lay the muddy bottom; death from disease would have been far more likely.

It would have taken more than stagnant water to prevent the Kabulis from enjoying the use of their river. In it, in small groups of four or five, naked children splashed and swam only a few feet away from the place where a *jui* was discharging. Happy in their enjoyment of a swim during the heat, they urinated, bathed in and drank the filthy water, under the watchful eye of their mothers who were washing their clothes. Who could blame these people for their ignorance? Even if they had known that the water which they were using was more than likely—or rather, quite likely, for the Afghan constitution is so strong that it resists infection under circumstances quite inconceivable to a European—to



Khanabad melon shop



Khanabad tea shop, with samovars

give them some virulent disease, they could have done little about it; the slightly preferable filth of the *jui* does not serve the whole town, and to buy water from Paghman would have been an expense which they could not have afforded. So they used the river, trusting to the accumulated resistance of generations to protect them.

Only a few hundred yards farther up, drivers of the gaudy lorries we had seen were driving them into the water for a wash. This method was again a far easier process than anything else—where there is no piped water, there can be no pressure hoses. Amongst the several vehicles there, one or two were cars with *Corps Diplomatique* plates on them, doubtless driven down by a chauffeur who found this the easiest way of maintaining a diplomatic standard of smartness on a car.

On the other side of the embankment were the shops. These were, almost to the exclusion of all else, coffee shops, tailors' shops or hatters' shops where one could buy Karakul. Being in no need of coffee or of the fly-blown sticky cakes that were displayed, and having no inclination to sample the art of a Kabul tailor, I walked into a hatter's, my mind once more intent on personal appearance: the brown hat which I had bought some two years earlier at a fashionable Bond Street shop was by now in shreds, and a replacement, apart from its souvenir value, was desirable, if not essential.

The first shop I entered obviously had a fairly large European clientèle. A smiling Tajik who knew a few words of English got up from his bench and showed me his wares. A hat of this nature is not usually merely bought: the prospective purchaser first chooses his skin—one is enough—and then has the hat made. The skins which were laid out before me were those of very young lambs from the Northern Provinces. I had been repeatedly told in England that these Karakul or "Persian" lambskins were those of an unborn lamb, but the shopkeeper gave me quite a long lecture to the effect that they were rather those of an animal some days old.

My ambition was to own a hat of that tawny colour which is usually only worn by the richest classes and which is called Golden Karakul, but the prices in this shop were so excessive that I decided against it. On my trying to bargain with the man, he looked at me pityingly and said :

“Why should I sell this skin to you at a lower price? I will sell it anyway; there are plenty of rich people here.”

Somewhat disconcerted, I went to another shop. Here, although the shop would have been almost impossible to distinguish from the previous one, the attitude was different. An old man was busy at a sewing machine and paid not the slightest attention to me as his son, a young man in his early twenties, came to attend to my needs. On the wall hung one or two garish pictures of Mecca, recognizable only because of its huge black stone, and an assortment of Karakul, tiger and cat skins. The whole shop can have been no bigger than fifteen feet square, with its door opening directly on to the street; the only furniture in it was a bench, a table and a stove on which an iron was heating. I was shown a variety of skins, of identical quality to those in the previous shop, and at half the price. He took my measurements, marvelled at the size of my head and promised to have the hat ready for the next day.

Only a few minutes' walk from there brought me to the bazaar. This was a very different place from the comparatively trim row of shops on the other side of the river. Many Oriental bazaars—such as the ones at Teheran, Qandahar or Isfahan—are covered over, with the shops to either side of a sort of cloister. That in Kabul is open, and there is little doubt that it loses that air of mystery which is to be found elsewhere. The multitudinous smells of the East, although probably more numerous in Kabul than elsewhere, escape into the open after leaving only a soupçon of their existence in the nose of the passer-by. Any of a dozen languages may be heard as Sikhs, Pathans, Persians, Mongols, Turcomans and Uzbeks pad up and down the dusty alleyways, inspecting the wares

laid out for sale. Many are bare-footed, most are bearded and all turn to stare at the occasional tourist with his camera. Such women as there are to be seen are all veiled in a *chadri*, a drab silk veil which, unlike its short equivalent worn in Syria or the medium-length wrap to be seen in Persia, descends to within a few inches of the ground; the wearer is able to look out at the world through a sort of gauze grille placed in front of her eyes. If the curious foreigner should from time to time notice a remarkably well-stockinged ankle or a pair of obviously Paris-shod feet peeping coyly out from beneath this uniform exterior, he may be sure that he will be allowed to see no more, for no Afghan woman would dare to appear unveiled in public, and those foreign women who stroll around the streets of Kabul without one are left strictly alone by an Afghan public slightly disgusted at this indecency, just as the crowds in Harrods might shy prudishly away from the sight of Marilyn Monroe in an evening dress.

The bazaar is far more quiet than the one in, for example, Teheran. There are few of the coppersmiths' hammers whose beating makes such an attractive background in Isfahan, and only the restrained hubbub of voices is to be heard. Occasionally a small boy, bearing like a milkmaid a couple of earthen pots of *mast* suspended from his shoulders, raises his voice to proclaim his wares, or a policeman may force his way through the crowd in order to prevent a foreigner from taking "picturesque" photographs of the slums. Every hour or so, to the accompaniment of much shouting and cheering, a great light-blue Zis lorry with a water-spray on its front comes lumbering along the streets, discharging its water on to the ground in order to lay the dust. It crawls along at a snail's pace, for no one gets out of its way: all are anxious to receive a cool drenching. Hens squawk as they rush away from it, donkeys bray, boys shout gleefully and all cluster round as it rumbles its slow and majestic way out of sight, leaving behind it a smell of wet earth and spice before the moisture finally evaporates.

Uniforms are to be seen everywhere. The police are easily recognizable by their breeches and tunics and by their appearance, which is far smarter than that of the Army; just in case this should not be enough, the word *POLIS* is engraved in large letters on the buckles of their belts. By contrast to them, the Army look very slovenly, with torn khaki uniforms, dirty boots, a week's growth of beard on their faces and caps similar to those which used to be worn by the Japanese. They differ from the Turkish Army in their air of mental slovenliness which was completely absent in the Turks who, almost equally scruffy though they were, nevertheless looked tough and self-respecting. On questioning one soldier, I was told that as a National Serviceman he received no pay for six months, that he could not afford to buy either razor blades or shoe-polish and that he was very happy in the Army.

It is, of course, fairly well known that the Afghan Army, said to stand at about seventy thousand, is used only for internal security and that the Pathan tribes are the country's principal defence against foreign attack. We heard one good example of the use to which the Army had recently been put. In the centre of Afghanistan there is a tribe called the Hazara, said to be descendants of Chenghis Khan's Mongol hordes who have settled there. These are normally peaceful farmers who cultivate their rocky country efficiently, and who are content to live at peace with the world; they have, however, a feud with the Pathans who, almost to the exclusion of everyone else, are the rulers of the country. It was said that when a general mobilization had been called for all Afghans to rally round in defence against the 'threat from Pakistan', the Hazaras had refused to be called up for *pishk*, or military service, in what they considered to be a purely Pathan affair. What happened afterwards was not quite clear, as whole areas of the Hazarajat were sealed off, but rumour had it that Pathan military units had moved in to make the recalcitrants see reason. Inquiries as to the truth of this met with no more than a blank stare, and we never found out

any more; but the same rumour was heard in several different quarters.

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The evening after this visit to the bazaar was remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, we were very glad to see a party of friends of ours from Cambridge who were passing through on their way to the Spiti Himalaya. Peter Holmes and Alastair Lamb, and their wives, had just arrived in their two Morris Minor vans, having taken their time over the journey in order to sightsee. They commended our decision to come through northern Turkey, as Baghdad had been unbearably hot; they had also come via Qandahar, and one of the women was suffering from the after-effects of the heat. It was very pleasant to be able to compare notes, and pleasanter still—at least for us—to think that we would have little more of this heat, whereas they still had the horrors of the Khyber and of Pakistan to undergo.

The second memorable feature of that evening was a party given by the Ambassador, Sir Daniel Lascelles. After a very excellent dinner, to which it seemed that most of Kabul's diplomatic community had been invited, the company adjourned into one of the great reception rooms to hear a concert on gramophone records. The idea was excellent, for where at another party forced conversation and bridge would probably have been the order of the day, here there was no need for either. The lights were decently dimmed, so that those who wished to doze rather than to listen to the music could do so—at an altitude of nearly six thousand feet sleep comes easily; whilst the vast majority who hardly unnaturally felt starved for music could listen to a well-chosen and superbly reproduced programme of Bach, Brahms, Schubert, Beethoven and Kodály, with cups of green tea in the intervals. The big room with its fine furniture and carpets, the attentive audience—all might have belonged to another age, with a chamber orchestra instead of a gramophone playing, and

when the evening finally drew to a close, everyone present seemed very aware of the distance, more in time than in space, that they were from home.

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When I made my usual morning call on the Rector the next day, I found him particularly affable. He was very glad to let us know that our permits had at last come through from the Ministry of the Interior. We were going to be allowed to enter the province of Badakhshan and "certain unprohibited areas of the valley of the Kokcha river". So saying, he handed us a great sheaf of papers which were to be used to smooth our way north. When we arrived at Faizabad, we should get in touch with the Governor, who would be entirely at our disposal, to let us know where we might go.

The news was hardly as good as it sounded, for although Badakhshan is but little visited, there are parts which are interesting and parts which are not. In particular, the area in which our mountain was to be found was out of bounds, but we optimistically comforted ourselves with the thought that a Governor was bound to have wide powers of discretion, and that he would surely be easy to deal with.

The Land-Rover was fetched from the garage, looking strangely clean: it had been hosed down both inside and outside, and the first few hundred miles would at any rate be more or less dust-free. Our equipment was loaded again, and we all drove down to the petrol pump in order to load up with our ration. This done, we returned to the Embassy and dined with the Dullings. We spent our last night on the lawn, so that we should be able to leave very early without waking anyone.

At half-past four the next morning the car was started and we drove along the tarmac, turned right out of the gate, acknowledged the salute of the sleepy Pakistani guard and turned to have a last look at the Big House as it reflected the glow of the rising sun. People were just beginning to stir as we turned the car on to the road which leads to the north.

Chapter Five

THE ROAD TO BADAKHSHAN

THE heat of the day found us well up in the mountains, and for that reason we decided to spend it on a detour instead of on rest as had been our previous wont. Lying some ten miles off the main road to Turkistan and at a height of over eight thousand feet, the valley of Bamian is rightly one of the main attractions for tourists in the whole country, and as a result boasts what must be by far the finest hotel. Just before the high Shiba Pass the road branches, and by taking the western fork, which leads along a river and in some places under a cliff, Bamian is reached.

This valley is notable as the western outpost of a previous Buddhist civilization, through which the caravans from China used to travel after crossing the Ak Robat pass on their way to India. In the middle of the seventh century the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang visited Bamian, which according to his record of the journey was at that time an important community with several monasteries. Nearly six centuries later, all traces of the Buddhist civilization were abruptly swept away when Chenghis Khan crossed the Hindu Kush in pursuit of the Turkish ruler of the country, laid siege to Bamian, and utterly destroyed the old city. Today, the valley is cultivated by Chenghis Khan's poverty-stricken Hazara descendants, and the only traces of the old Buddhist inhabitants are the two great Buddhas hewn out of the rock on the northern side of the valley. These monuments, one hundred and one hundred and thirty feet high respectively, are remarkably well preserved, having by some miracle escaped the fury of the Mongols. The only damage that they have sustained is that the top half of either face has been sheered away. Erosion has also worked its part, but the Buddhas have

been safeguarded by a buttress erected, on the urgent advice of the French archæological mission, when it became obvious that one of them would collapse if something were not done about it.

To either side of the Buddhas, and honeycombing the cliff as far as the old red fort of Zohak some miles to the east—a fort also destroyed by Chenghis Khan—there are caves in the rock, giving it the appearance of Gruyère cheese. We were told that at one time these caves had housed Buddhist monks; now only a few were lived in by local inhabitants of indeterminate religion, whose heads could be seen with our binoculars as they surveyed us from on high.

After crossing the Shiba, we were once more in the rugged country so reminiscent of Lermontov's Caucasian poetry. The scenery's charm is unique, with its black cliffs towering up on either side of the gorge, whose occasional widenings into brilliantly lush-green meadow are often dominated by the ruined stronghold of some robber Khan of times gone by. On the rocks which impede the river's downward rush there are small bushes growing, whose delicately shaded flowers give a pinkish luminosity to the gloom of the gorges, and whose sweetness is just perceptible in the cool air.

It was not very long before we could feel the imminence of the plains once more, and in the hope of having a night of sound sleep we camped in a wadi whilst still in the mountains. The evening started badly. Our stove, of a well-known Swedish make, which had served us so well until now, finally decided that the time had come to object to the horrors of the petrol with which we were feeding it. With a loud s-s-s-s it spat out a stream of fiery liquid over my leg, heated itself up to a bright cherry red all over and sat on the ground, looking baleful and bubbling quietly to itself. My leg was only singed, but the loss of the stove would have been keenly felt, as we depended upon a diet of rice, onions and meat, which we cooked in the two enormous pressure-cookers which had been given to us by a generous English firm. The stove was

picked up with a pair of pliers and dipped in a nearby stream, after which it consented to work sporadically until we got a new one in Teheran two months later. Then someone else scalded himself with a jet of steam when the pressure-cookers were finally brought to working temperature. It was on top of this that we discovered that our supply of chocolate had been soaked in petrol and was by now unusable. When we finally got to bed, late and bad-tempered, a swarm of mosquitoes arose from the wadi to plague us and make sleep an impossibility. It was one of those nights. We arose the next morning, bleary-eyed and cross, having overslept, and therefore had to breakfast and pack after sunrise—the heat made this a most unpleasant task.

The river had in the course of a fortnight dropped a good yard at the place where we had met with the man to whom we had given a plaster: half a mile or so downstream, at Pul-i-Khumri, the hydro-electric plant was beginning to show signs of a shortage of water. The electricity derived from this plant furnishes the power required by the town, which is planned to become an industrial centre. Already there are cotton mills, a few small factories and workers' quarters offering quite reasonable accommodation; it is one of the few industrialized areas in the country, and its whole future depends on the river water which drives the turbines. Our scepticism about the electric power proved unfounded, for later on, when we passed through yet again, the water had dwindled to about a third of what it was now, and the generators were still working.

Instructions had been given to us in Kabul to call on the Governor of Baghlan, the capital of the province of Kataghan. He was the immediate superior of the Governor of Badakhshan and could, it seemed, do much to expedite our progress. The town was difficult to find, as, like most Afghan towns, it sprawled over a very large area and it was hard to recognize where the villages ended and the town began. We stopped the car, and as usual a crowd appeared in what had been a com-

pletely deserted street, to gather round, display the usual interest in our bare limbs and stare. Our letter of introduction to the Governor, written in the almost indecipherable "broken" Persian script, was brought out and handed to the most intelligent-looking of the bystanders. He took the letter out of its envelope with an expression of lively understanding, unfolded it and placed it flat on the car, where he pored over it for some minutes like a solicitor reading a brief. Finally he looked up, somewhat embarrassed.

"*Ki mikhoanad?*" he asked the others. "Who reads?"

The question had been put with characteristic delicacy. An Englishman might ask another the question "Do you dance?" in much the same way, it being tacitly understood that whereas everybody *can* dance, not everybody chooses to divert himself in this way. Similarly an Afghan, faced with such a question about reading, would answer "No, I do not read," with an air of hauteur which was supposed to convey the impression that whereas he was perfectly able to do so if he wished, he normally did not wish, preferring to get menials to undertake the task for him. Here, just as a Londoner might never admit to cleaning his own shoes, no one could be persuaded to admit that he could read, until one young man from Kabul, pushing aside this hedge of face-saving whose only object was to conceal illiteracy, read the letter and informed us that the Governor was away in the country and would not be back for some days. Apparently feeling that since we were foreign we should be introduced to Baghlan's foreign community, he then took us to the sugar factory, where we found half a dozen Germans bathing in a swimming-pool. Their unpleasantness on hearing that we were British convinced us that they were representatives of the many Nazis who, afraid to return to their own country, have settled in Afghanistan and are now busy doing innumerable technical jobs for the Government and who live in salutary fear that their residence permits may not be extended. These Germans did, how-

ever, confirm that the Governor was not in, that he never was in and that we had best move on.

Shopping in Baghlan also proved a disappointment: we had to hunt from shop to shop, buying eggs one at a time; there was no meat or vegetables to be had. We were assisted in our searches by a small boy of about ten who attached himself to us, and whose slightly lighter hair, fair skin and blue eyes made us wonder whether he might not be the descendant of some British soldier who might have visited the country during one of the Afghan wars. The crowd, mistaking our interest in him, roared with delighted laughter and tried to persuade us to accept his by no means unwilling services in another capacity. To make up for the disappointment caused to him, we gave him a ride in the car as far as the petrol station, and allowed him to go and rouse the old man whose duty it was to work the pump.

Once more, the same scene of taking petrol was repeated—the coaxing into action of the pump, the first distant gurgles in the delivery pipe as the fuel began to mount, the final spurt of petrol. The ration ticket had to be signed and the money counted out, whilst in the background the old man, chanting “*Yek . . . Yek . . . Yek . . . Do . . . Do . . . Do . . .*” would keep track of the number of gallons that had gone in. The petrol stations never had more than one pump, and they were usually surrounded by a wall made of petrol tins, on whose blue background the word *BENSIN* in Russian letters proclaimed their country of origin. Outside the “station”, with their feet dangling in the *jui* and their wares spread out in front of them, there were always a number of fruit-sellers. Here in Kataghan in particular, the fruit was especially good and cheap, although in variety it never went beyond melons, grapes and occasionally peaches and apricots. The melons were probably the best buy, being extremely sweet and weighing anything up to seven or eight pounds; the grapes also, at one or two *afghanis* for a pound, were such as one rarely sees in Europe. The vendors would unconcernedly rinse

them in the *jui* before handing them over to the buyer. We usually loaded the car with fruit—which seemed to go at an inordinate rate—and the two who were sitting in the back would rinse the grapes in permanganate solution as we went along.

Dawn the next morning was very different from dawn in England. At one moment, it seemed that there was no more than a silvery radiance in the sky to the east; a few moments later, the yellow sun would be beating down once more, having undergone no intermediate stage of pink. Sunset had been the same, with almost no transition between the golden glow of afternoon and the blackness of night. We had spent the night by the same river that we had been following since Bamian, now grown syrupy and sluggish as it meandered soapily through a hilly desert, and a remarkable contrast to its boisterous tributaries higher up. By eleven o'clock, which was when the sun began in earnest to make its heat felt, we had arrived at Khanabad after crossing a very short stretch of desert remarkable for nothing except a mountain lion whose corpse we saw dangling from some telephone wires, for no apparent reason and miles from anywhere.

It was hot in Khanabad: the crowd which had gathered from the whole province for the monthly market day did not make it seem any cooler as they swarmed round the car in their hundreds to have a look at these curious creatures who wore no clothes and did not speak Persian. A swarthy face would materialize at the window, stare in for a few seconds and be pushed away, only to be replaced by another face. Sitting in the back of the car, I realized how a particularly fine octopus I once saw in an aquarium at Monte Carlo acquired its baleful aspect. John and Richard in front somehow managed to force their doors open and sallied out, to buy food and to take photographs of the sea of faces which had all but hidden the car. Immediately they saw the cameras, there was a muttering whilst they discussed what they were, followed by frenzied cries of "'Aks, 'aks." These followers

of the Prophet, probably amongst the strictest in the world, and whose religion was so firm in its prescription of iconoclasm, were asking the infidels to make graven images of them. The infidels obliged, for Khanabad was without a doubt the most Oriental-looking town that we had seen, with a great many slanting eyes, yellowish skins and pigtaails mingling with the beards and turbans of the Tajiks. Our arrival was a rival attraction to the music and dancing which were being produced only a few hundred yards away, and the crowd did all it could by passive resistance to prevent the car from leaving.

We were now on the last stretch of our journey as we left Khanabad and headed for Faisabad, the capital of the province of Badakhshan. The town itself is often referred to by the name of the province, and the province may also be known as Faisabad; however, there is only one road, and the confusion arising out of this is therefore less than might be expected. For some forty miles the road follows the Khanabad river, a stream about a quarter of a mile wide which comes rushing down on its way to the Oxus. We stopped in order to spend the heat of the day in comparative coolness, and lay down in the shade of the car. Before very long, we were joined by a pair of young Tajiks who had been swimming in the river with empty and sealed gourds tied to their backs. We had all been swimming in the river and this precaution against drowning seemed, to me at any rate, to be quite unnecessary. I granted that the current was flowing very fast, but the water was not more than four feet deep and it would have been difficult to come to any harm. Armed with this totally unjustified confidence, I swam out to an island in the middle of the river without difficulty. Going from strength to strength, I floated down to the point where the two branches of the river joined at the foot of the island, and was rewarded with a convincing demonstration of the advisability of using the despised gourds: in a smooth patch of water where I stopped to rest I felt myself suddenly sucked into complete

blackness some five feet down in the turgid water and quite unable to surface until the river, having held me under for what seemed an age, suddenly and contemptuously spat me out on to the surface, leaving me to make my way to the shore unmolested. I returned to the car and to the absorbing thought that none of the others had even noticed my absence.

Some miles upstream, the map told us that we should turn off the road by a caravanserai. As there was no turning visible, we went on along the same road until we were brought to a halt by a village, called Farkhar, where we were told to turn round and keep a sharp eye open to the right. Back we went, seeing nothing on the right but a great stony wadi, looking like the track of a glacier but more likely to be that of a torrent which only flowed in spring. A peasant standing by the caravanserai enlightened us.

"Yes, yes, *Paisabad* [he pronounced it with a P] is up there," he said, pointing vaguely up the half-mile-wide wadi, "you will find a road too, quite a bit farther on."

A bone-shaking drive up the wadi brought us to the watershed between the Khanabad and Kokcha rivers. The country seemed fairly green and fertile, with little villages clustering in the folds of the land. As we passed the fields, we were surprised time after time by the dreamlike apparition of crowds of about a score of women in red dresses, who came rushing at us over the fields, beating tambourines, singing and laughing. They stopped by the side of the road to look at us and only turned away their unveiled faces at the very last moment. It might have been the effects of imagination brought on by a prolonged masculine existence, but the glimpses we caught of them left us impressed with one fact: that these women were without exception exceedingly beautiful, with oval, pale faces and dark eyes. Somewhat surprised at this forwardness in a land where the only unveiled women we had seen had been either young girls or Europeans, we realized that we were passing through isolated patches of Uzbek settlements in a province which is predominantly

Tajik. Uzbeks are of Turkish descent, speaking a language not unlike modern Turkish, whereas the Tajiks are related to the Persians. The difference between Turk and Persian was here reversed, for where in their respective countries the former had appeared dour and reserved and the latter ebullient, it was now the Tajik who seemed withheld and the Uzbek who was gay and irresponsible.

At Kishm—now in the valley of the Kokcha river—we were given yet another of many demonstrations of the Afghan security system. We were waved to a halt by a man in uniform who later turned out to be the Commissioner of the district, and who gave us a very pressing invitation to join him for tea. His knowledge of English was very much worse than our own few words of Persian, but he insisted on our speaking English with him. He introduced himself, with a peculiar intonation which can only be described as warbling, by the title of Hakim Sahib Gul Mohammed, and explained that, charmed though he was at the prospect of our being his guests, the invitation was one which we *had* to accept, for he was waiting to get into telephone contact with Faisabad before he could let us go any farther. He led us into another of the inevitable rest-houses which differed from the others only in that it was set in a garden made heliotrope and white by the blooms of hundreds of petunias. He was very proud of this garden and of the rest-house: both were less than a year old and we were to be the first foreigners to enter them. We sat for a long time over the tea, looking out over the tops of the poplar trees at the snow-clad peaks of the Khwaja Mohammad range, and telling him of our plans in slow and deliberate English occasionally helped out with a word of Persian.

It now seemed so unlikely that we would be allowed anywhere near a mountain of any significance that we asked Gul Mohammed if there would be any objection to our climbing the highest of the snow-clad peaks that we could see to the east. When he answered that he saw no reason against it, we asked what its name was, and how long it took to get there.

The Commissioner summoned one of the men who were standing round and asked him; like the Commissioner, he too looked vague and asked a third man, then a fourth. No one knew, but one fellow volunteered the idea that he thought it was about a day's ride away, and that the mountain might be called Khombok.

"But have you no maps, your Excellency?" I asked.

"Oh yes . . . yes, we have plenty of maps. But they are all in my house, and it is *such* a way to go and fetch them." He looked at ours, made by the Survey of India. "*Much* better than yours," he added, knowing that we knew that he had no maps, and that there never had been any maps of Afghanistan other than those made by the British. We showed him what we had, and his finger wandered over the paper aimlessly.

"I suppose it is in the Khwaja Mohammad," he said. "You will probably be allowed to go there. I do—not know—if it is—*outlaw*," he smiled at this demonstration of his command of English. Visions of Robin Hood floated before my eyes.

"You mean—bandits, bad men?" I asked, not without hope.

"No, *good* men. *Very* good men. The mountain—*outlaw*," Gul Mohammed warbled on.

"But outlaws are bad men. Is the mountain a bad mountain?"

"No, no. *Very* good mountain, but *outlaw*. Like Wakhan. *Telefon* . . . Kabul. *Ajازه*," he added.

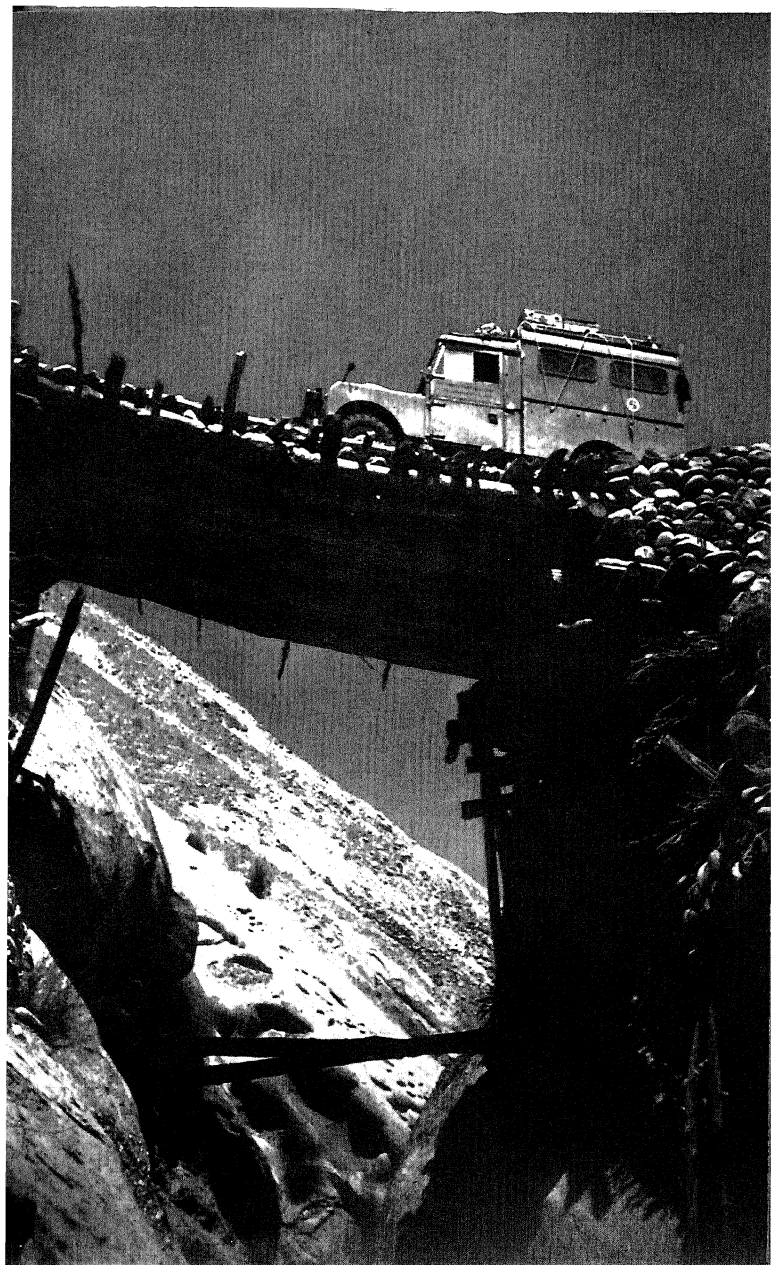
"Oh."

That seemed about all there was to say. In order to climb mountains in Afghanistan a permit was needed.

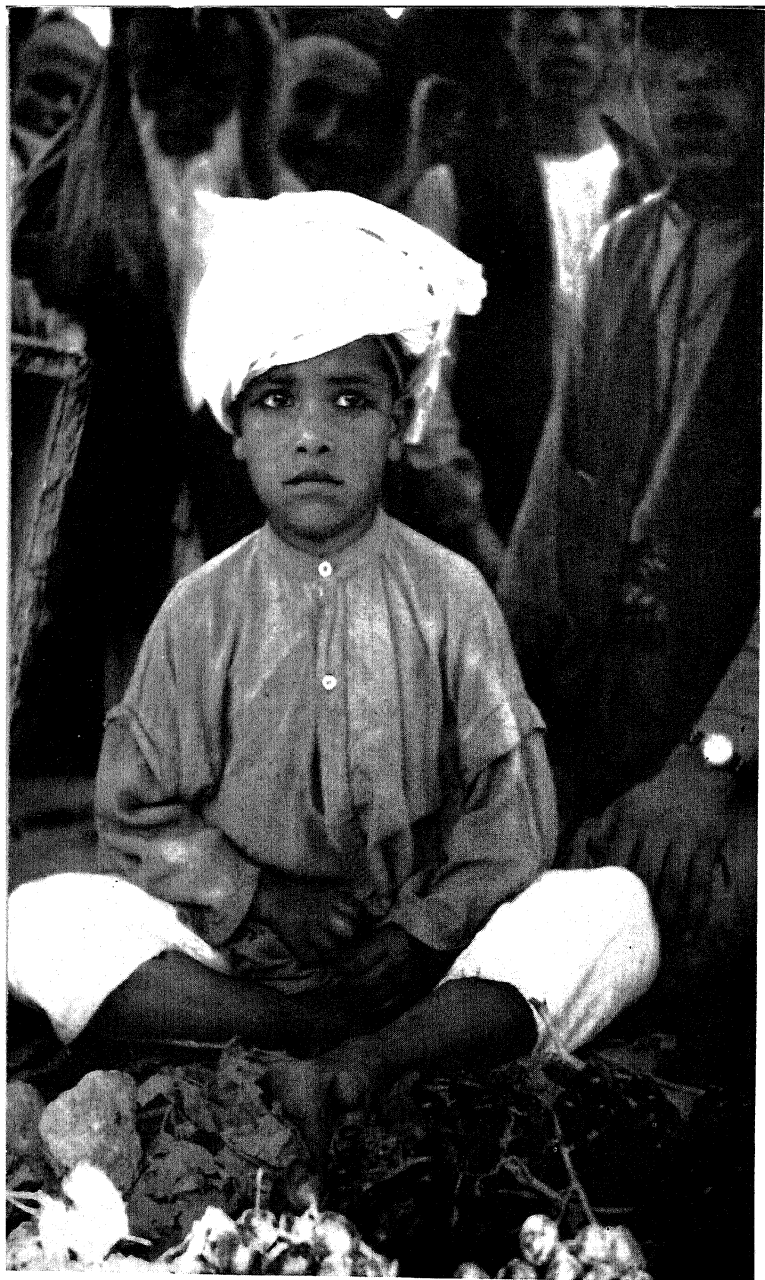
"Excuse me," Gul Mohammed said as a boy came into the room. "Hakim Sahib Ala"—at this point there was a pause, almost as if he expected us to rise to our feet at the very mention of the name—"Hakim Sahib Ala is on the telephone."

After a few minutes he returned, smiling.

"You may go," he said. "Hakim Sahib Ala"—again the reverent pause—"is expecting you this evening. Perhaps I



A bridge



Boy selling grapes

shall see you on your return. In the meantime"—he wagged a roguishly admonitory finger at us—"no turnings off to Farkhar, and don't swim in the river for so long that you cannot arrive tonight. *Hakim Sahib Ala expects you.*"

Evidently we were being as closely watched as ever, and all our doings were still being reported by telephone.

Soon the road was following the Kokcha river itself, stuck, as it were, on to the side of a cliff, sometimes at water-level and sometimes hundreds of feet above the tawny roaring stream. The river is in places at least a hundred yards wide and must be well over ten feet deep; it flowed faster than I could run. Its waters were smooth on top, but, as I learned on swimming in them, they gave a most disconcertingly affectionate tug to one's feet if these were allowed to dangle. From time to time the road would have to cross the various tributaries which flowed into the Kokcha from the mountains by means of rickety and creaking little bridges made of parallel poplar trunks. At first, we all jumped out on coming to one of these, ostensibly to take photographs of the car crossing, while the driver took the car across alone; but it soon became obvious that the bridges were quite strong enough, and as there were many of them, we took them in our stride, and continued our progress along the precipice like a fly along a piece of sticky paper. Night fell with its usual suddenness before we had seen more than one or two men with donkeys, and a brilliant silver moon took its place in the sky, shedding its metallic radiance on the road and on the river beneath it, while the yellow gleam of the headlights seemed faint by comparison and made the silvery world around them seem leaden. At one point the road was flooded to a depth of about a foot and we were a part of the torrent; at another we could look down on it from a height of a quarter of a mile as it rushed on its relentless way northwards. The road finally left the river and led through some fields, where we stopped for a few moments. A few wraith-like peasants appeared out of the cloud of dust that we had raised and gathered round the car

to stare; their gentle wondering voices emphasized the quiet that prevailed away from the river. "Faisabad is just around the corner," they said.

"Just around the corner" lay the river once more, and from above it we could see the twinkling of a few lights in the midst of a large, inky-black patch on the other side. We crossed by another bridge which shuddered violently under the car, and followed the directions of soldiers who had evidently been posted in the streets to show us where to go, until we arrived at a whitewashed building lying on a piece of land which jutted slightly into the river. The caretaker of the rest-house came out, a lantern in his hand, to show us to our room. In the passage we just caught a glimpse of the enigmatic words, written in four different colours of pencil on a piece of paper stuck on the wall :

KOKCHA COFFEE
IS READY FOR VISITORS
ROOM FOR 24 HOURS 15 R
LUNCH AND DINNER IN ORDER

We retired to bed on the hard charpoys, dead tired and only dimly aware of the thundering of the Kokcha fifteen feet below our window.

* * * *

In the morning, we were awakened by a dapper Pathan of middle age who appeared in the doorway in a karakul hat and a European-style suit. He announced himself as 'Ata Mohammed, the Governor's personal assistant. Speaking Persian with a high-pitched whine, he further gave us to understand that he was an interpreter, as he spoke French. "*Oui, monsieur, moi parler français,*" he added in support of this statement. They were the only words of French I ever heard him use. He went on to say that the Governor, Hakim Sahib Ala himself, welcomed us into his province as guests, and invited us to a luncheon at twelve o'clock on that day, if this were con-

venient. No one else had asked us as it happened, we replied, and were delighted to accept.

'Ata—as we thenceforward called him—then vanished in a way that we later came to regard as characteristic. After some hours spent having breakfast and pottering about the car, we were confronted by a very different type of person. Instead of the willowy Afghan, a burly European with a fortnight's growth of beard strode forward to inspect us. He wore a dirty shirt open at the neck to display a matted growth of hair on his chest, a pair of khaki drill trousers supported by a belt on which were slung half a dozen articles ranging from a yard-long, two-edged sword to such prosaic things as a compass and waterproof match-case. In his hand he held a knife whose blade was stained with blood and bits of fish entrails. His eyes were of a piercing blue which bored into us as he introduced himself.

"*Fourier-Aubry*," he said accusingly. "*Bonjour*."

None of us had heard the name of the French adventurer and writer before, but the lack of impression created by his name had been amply compensated for by the obvious surprise caused by his ferocious mien and outlandish air. He had with him a young Afghan doctor from Kabul, who spoke very good French and explained that he had come up to Badakhshan for his health as he had tuberculosis. The two of them, as well as ourselves, had been invited to luncheon with the Governor and, "*puisque nous sommes déjà une heure en retard*," Fourier-Aubry suggested that we might think about going there. Accordingly, we walked along the steeply inclined and now deserted streets of Faisabad, talking as we went.

"I am an adventurer," said Fourier-Aubry. "I have found adventure almost everywhere I have been, whether shark fishing in the Southern Pacific or gold-hunting in South America. I found some gold by the way—I used it to buy a fishing boat. I also make a little pocket-money by writing."

"You must be very rich," I said.

"Oh, yes, I am rich. But you see, I don't believe in keeping money, but in spending it. They all know—these Afghans, everybody—that I am rich, and they cheat me. I shout, I bargain—but they cheat me just the same. I don't care—there is plenty more where that came from; in fact, I rather like being cheated. I was cheated on buying my jeep that you saw at the hotel, but I don't care. What I want is something interesting, some *life*."

"You sound depressed. Don't you find much life here?"

"*Bah. L'Afghanistan, c'est un pays moche*. Everywhere one goes there are spies, spies, spies, security, security, security. For what? Against whom? There are no bandits here, so why do they keep me bottled up in Faisabad instead of letting me go up to the north? Shall I tell you the trouble with this country? It's getting *civilized*. Yes, *mon ami*, Afghanistan, the wild and dangerous country we have all read about, is becoming civilized—at least if you call Coca-Cola and chewing gum civilization. The Americans are moving in. Twenty years ago it would have been you, but England is finished, like France, perhaps even like all Europe. Do you know what I saw in Qandahar? *Coca-Cola*. And in Kabul? *Coca-Cola*, price fifteen *afghanis* a bottle. In five years the whole world will know the Coca-Cola sign." His eyes became dreamy as he gazed at the bridge and visualized the final horror in store for the world.

"Even here . . ." he muttered, "*après cinq années. . . Coca-Cola . . . en vente . . . là-bas sur le pont de Faisabad*."

The momentary sadness brought on by a vision of Coca-Cola for sale on the Faisabad bridge evaporated at luncheon, when he regaled the company with stories of his time in the South Seas. The meal—as usual centring around a bowl of *polau* and washed down with *dukh*—would otherwise have been a difficult one, for the Governor was not at his best in French, and our own supply of small-talk in English was limited. Hakim Sahib Ala Jume Khan—to give him his full title—did, however, give us to understand one thing: our permits were quite definitely *not* valid for the Wakhan, nor

for Nuristan. We might visit the Kokcha valley as far as Jurm, but might not stray out of it. 'Ata had been detailed to "look after our activities", and any queries which we might have on reaching our area—"oh, by the way, I strongly advise you to go to the Boharak plain—it's about the best place"—were to be addressed to him. It would have been an even greater mistake to show chagrin or annoyance in Afghanistan than to do so in England, but the announcement was hardly a welcome one.

In spite of the Governor's own very great personal charm and of the ebullience of Fourier-Aubry, the meal had made us feel uneasy, a feeling in no way alleviated by the fact that the Governor had a telephone permanently at his side, or by his persistent, if delicate, questioning.

"You have a wireless in the car? Good. I suppose you can get London on it? Quite so. And do they receive your messages all right? Oh, it isn't a transmitter? I thought it was." "Are you making any maps? I see, only of villages. You have no surveying instruments with you . . . yes, of course. Your own maps are pretty good, anyway, aren't they?"

The afternoon was drawing on by the time that we felt we could bid good-bye to the Governor and his two children, to whom he had introduced us. We informed him that we would leave Faisabad on the following afternoon, and retired to the hotel, where Fourier-Aubry had promised to give us a lesson in salting fish.

"We'll do it here, in the washroom," he said. "But it is far too small to hold all of us. Don't you think two of you had better go to the town and buy provisions? Here—I'll give you some advice. You won't find much food up there, so buy what you can in Faisabad. Get three times what you need: a kilo of tea, twenty-five of rice and twenty-five of sugar. And get salt. You'll need it all the time. *Twenty kilos.*"

John had volunteered to go and get what was wanted, and his eyes bulged as he heard the astronomical quantities enumerated.

"I'll get a third of that," he said shortly as he trudged away.

Our teacher had disappeared for a few moments and was now returning with half a dozen fine fat trout.

"*Poisson*," he explained somewhat superfluously, throwing the fish on to a wooden bench and drawing his knife. "The main principle of salting is to get out the water so that the meat cannot rot, so we slit the fish"—so saying, he neatly gutted the fish—"and lay it out open and flat. Then we lightly separate the bones from the flesh. *Très important*," he added emphatically, pointing at the spine of the fish. "*Pourriture—depuis ici*. The rot always starts at the bones. Now we grind up some rock-salt and spread it on liberally, and we leave it to dry in the sun. In two or three days it will be dry, and you can then soak it in water before cooking. *Délicieux*—but be careful the dogs don't get it." Finally, all the six fish had been salted and laid out to dry, and we were given them as a present.

Loading operations started at ten o'clock the next morning, as they were complicated and drawn out by the presence of 'Ata as an addition to the party. He had appeared with an amount of luggage equal to that taken by any two of us, and including a British Army collapsible bed of the old and very cumbersome pattern. In addition, we had the stores bought in Faisabad—even now by no means negligible in quantity—and a full load of petrol. We had thought six hours to be enough time to allow for an operation which normally took a tenth of that time, but 'Ata's sorrowful insistence on saying good-bye to all his relations, combined with an extremely late breakfast which merged with luncheon and then with tea, delayed our start until six o'clock. It was whilst we were waiting for the tea to materialize—not a little impatiently—that John made an interesting discovery.

"Do you see where he is collecting the water from?" he asked, in tones of fury.

"Good Lord."

The Afghan cook and hotel caretaker was filling his earthen

jug from the river at the exact point where the lavatory [*sic*] discharged. It seemed quite pointless to remark on this to him as he carried the water up the stairs to the filthy little black room with the charcoal fire in the middle of the floor, which he used as sitting-room, bedroom and kitchen combined.

'Ata's seat was unfortunately not provided with a very good cushion, and his early delight at riding in the car quickly relapsed into an expression of pain, and finally of resignation, as the car bounced its way eastward, through the darkening gorge. Finally the gorge opened and a large and fertile-looking plain spread out in the early moonlight.

"*Inja Boharak*," said 'Ata, guiding us through the village. This was Boharak, the place to which we had been channelled by Authority. It looked unprepossessing enough as we were guided through it and across a bridge, but we reserved judgment for the morrow.

"Stop the car here," 'Ata said, "and follow me. I have a surprise for you."

Chapter Six

THE BOHARAK PLAIN

ATA'S surprise was indeed welcome. We had been anticipating that we would have to find a camping site, buy and cook food and bed down, all in the dark and with the additional complication of having an extra man to look after. We were wrong. 'Ata led us along a boggy little path through some trees into an open space, where we were delighted to find a rickety wooden table set on a terrace immediately above the river we had just crossed; the table was illuminated by a lantern, and two boys were cooking over a fire. At our approach, an officer in uniform got up from one of the chairs around the table and came to greet us. He wore the Prussian-type Afghan uniform with two rows of medals, and five stars on either shoulder. Introducing himself to us as the sub-Commissioner of Boharak, he bade us welcome to his district.

Within a few minutes most of our luggage had been unloaded, and our beds had been set up in the open. The place where we were to live for the next few weeks was a delightful spot, being an orchard just at the side of one of the four rivers that crossed the plain. Along the bank was a row of poplars, and it was to the other side of these that our table had been placed, on a small terrace which jutted out into the rocky stream. The yellow rays of the lantern illuminated the cascading waters a few feet below us as we dined, and their noise, a steady roar that was with us throughout our time in Boharak, made us raise our voices when we talked. Dinner progressed slowly and in the usual manner, until the sub-Commissioner finally got up, indicated that the four boys who had unloaded our equipment and cooked dinner were at our disposal for the rest of our time there, and went off to his house, accompanied by 'Ata.



The daughters
of the Jurm
Commissioner

'Ata Mohammed





In the garden behind the mosque at Boharak,
the mullah kept a sort of school

In the morning we found our poor expectations of the place to be unconfirmed. Within a few hours of getting up, some of us had climbed up one of the hills at the eastern end of the plain and were able to survey our surroundings from a height of fifteen hundred feet above it. The plain could be seen, almost directly below, some five miles by three and formed by the confluence of the four rivers which become what is called the Kokcha farther down. These rivers were flowing down from the mountains, and were still ice-cold, very fast and very turbulent; all but one of them were of a dull brownish colour because of the mud and powdered rock suspended in them. The one by which we had camped, and called the Zardeh, was of a brilliant clear blue. Surrounding the plain, and rising steeply to a height of some two thousand feet above it, were the mountains, the foothills of the snow-capped summits of the Hindu Kush which could be seen serrating the horizon sixty miles to the south, and of the glittering Pamir, visible to the east and north-east. To the west the hills closed in again to form the Kokcha gorge up which we had driven the day before; at our feet was the plain, its villages patches of dark green against the brown and gold of the cornfields; like unevenly-coloured tapes, its rivers were drawn across the plain, their roar just audible as a subdued and watery mutter, like the noise one hears on holding a conch to one's ear.

Back at our orchard, however, it became obvious that things were not going to be so very easy for us. In our absence 'Ata had been busy recruiting a number of villagers to keep a permanent watch on us and to accompany us wherever we went. There were, all told, four of these villagers, who were always around the camp and one of whom was always awake, even at night. They followed us to what seemed to be the most pointless places, even accompanying us up hills in order to make notes of what photographs we took—although they, like most of the other people of Boharak, had little idea of what a camera was for. Once, when we all went away to-

gether, our equipment was searched; nothing was stolen, but equally nothing seemed to have been overlooked. It was evident that they considered us to be spies, and no amount of harmless activity would convince them otherwise. The hallmark of a foreign spy in Afghanistan is a butterfly net, which brands him as surely as a crown brands a king; the net is used to conceal nefarious intentions in other fields, giving an air of innocence. Christopher had a butterfly net; *ergo*, Christopher was a spy. *Ergo*, we were all spies. Counter-espionage in Afghanistan was as simple as that; no attention was paid to us when we finally took the bull by the horns and argued that there was nothing to see in Badakhshan. "Ah, we do not know of anything of strategic importance here," was the invariable answer, "but then we do not know what is going on in the mind of the British Government."

The villagers of Boharak itself—the largest village in the plain—lost no time in coming to see the foreigners who had arrived in their valley, and very soon we had more than enough people with whom to discuss their affairs and whom we could ask about their way of life. One of these people attached himself permanently to us, and he proved to be very voluble when I asked him what his work was.

"I am a farmer," he replied, "like almost everyone else, except the mullahs and the police. As you can see, the ground is not at all bad here—I was in Faisabad once and saw how much worse it was around there—and we usually manage to get two crops of wheat in a year. In the old days I got more than enough to live on from selling what I did not need, but now I have two sons to keep on the same amount of land, so we have to work rather harder. Somehow . . . there seem to be so many people around now."

'Ata, who had been standing close by to make sure that the peasant was not being interrogated to the prejudice of national security, broke in to explain proudly that the valley now had a visit from a doctor—sent by the World Health

Organization in Kabul—up to three times a year, and that people were now living far longer than before.

“Ah yes,” said the peasant, “and there are more people too. When my father died, he left four sons and one daughter, to each of whom was given some land. I have two sons who will share what I have when I die, and I suppose their children will divide what they get. It’s very funny: people just do not seem to be dying any more. Still, there’s nothing to worry about yet; we grow more than enough really. . . .”

This was certainly no more than the truth. The soil of Boharak was extremely fertile and had been put to growing a number of different crops. The staple food, as in so many other parts of the world, was rice, of good quality and grown in paddy-fields. So much importance is attached to rice that there are a number of Persian words which are totally unrelated and which describe it in its various stages: *shaltuk* is rice when it is growing in its paddy; *berenj* is the raw rice when it had been husked; and there are a number of dishes prepared from this, ranging from *chelau*, which is simply boiled rice, through *shaleh*, which is a kind of broth, to *polau*, the dish made with meat and fat which we had already encountered. Apart from rice, there was a kind of mountain wheat which was said to be ready for the sickle in forty days and from which the round flat loaves of unleavened Afghan bread were made; a certain amount of wild maize was grown, its kernels unevenly spaced and of poor quality by comparison with its cultivated relation grown in the United States; there were also smaller crops of barley, potatoes, egg-plant, cucumber and wild onions—these latter were to be found growing on most hillsides. Melons and apples grew too, but perhaps because of the altitude they did not flourish and many were imported in exchange for grain and rice.

A mild climate, without any very harsh extremes of heat or cold, had made the inhabitants of Boharak lazy, and most of the work which would elsewhere have had to be done by men was done for them. In spite of the fact that for nine months of

the year there was virtually no rain, every cultivated part of the plain was liberally irrigated. The problem of removing the water from the turbulent rivers, where it could do no good, and of using it for the fields, had been solved many centuries ago by drawing off water, some miles away from the village, into canals which divided and subdivided until every square foot of land had enough water for what was growing there, but not enough to overflow and carry away any of the valuable topsoil. There seemed to be almost no need to control the amount of water entering the canals, and none was allowed to drain back into the river, so it appeared that a balance had been struck between the inlet and the evaporation. Rice fields were permanently under about a foot of water; melon fields had channels dug in zigzag patterns meandering all over them; while most of the other crops had straight channels running through them and keeping the soil wet. It was thus that Nature was allowed to do most of the work of irrigation, with Man's part restricted to the maintenance of the channels and ditches.

The water's work did, however, not end at irrigation. Just across the Zardeh river from our terrace was a small hut with a mysterious-looking machine in it, consisting of a water-wheel and two hammers at the end of long poles. This was an *awang*, a hammer used for husking rice. The wheel was mounted on a shaft with two wooden cams at the other end; as the water, running off the main channel, fell on the wheel and revolved it, the cams alternately forced down the end of one or other of the trunks, which in turn were pivoted on fulcrums, so that the hammer at the other end was raised; further revolving of the water-wheel brought the cam round to a point where it released the hammer, which then fell by force of gravity on to the rice. Having worked this engineering feat, the water ran on through the roof of a mill, where it turned a grindstone before flowing into the fields.

Although the peasant had not been very worried about a problem which he could not grasp, there was already evidence

that the pressure of population was not without effects upon the people of the valley. Land, divided and subdivided into uneconomical small plots, had already forced some families into joining with others in forming miniature co-operatives: this usually happened when two brothers were compelled to conclude that further subdivision of their father's plot was undesirable, and agreed to work together, dividing the produce. The system was not without its advantages, for the land still grew enough for all, and the net result of a surfeit of labour was an increase of leisure, for the unmechanized methods of farming had the cardinal advantage of providing part-time work for everybody, with plenty of time for rest and conversation under the trees and for smoking *chillums*, or hookahs.

Indeed, the benefits of mechanization would have been small in the plain. Any surplus population which could not conveniently be given work in the fields cultivated by their ancestors could be made self-supporting by sending them up the hillsides to make fertile the patches of arable land above. The crop grown there was mostly wheat, owing to the difficulty of irrigation, but it was no uncommon sight to find a farmer hard at work in a small and stony field after an hour's climb. The net result of unemployment serious enough to be considered as anything but a blessing—in other words, of a population which had totally outstripped the food-producing capacity of the area—would have been a drift to the towns, whose beginnings we had already seen, and such as occurred in England during the Industrial Revolution. However, where England had had factories which could provide a living—however poor—for the people in the towns, Afghanistan has virtually no industries beyond the cotton mills at Pul-i-Khumri, a few hydro-electric plants, and some sugar factories. Such people as were moving to the towns usually failed to find employment in Faisabad or Khanabad and ended up in Kabul, increasing the already vast slums there. In many ways, therefore, the people of Boharak had little cause to be grateful

to the doctors who, with the most noble of intentions, had upset what had previously been a perfect self-sufficiency, with the balance well maintained between births and deaths. At present, naturally unable to view the problem with the detached objectivity of one whom it does not concern, they thanked Allah for the doctors and went on breeding.

In point of fact, there was little cause to wonder at the doctors only coming to Boharak two or three times a year. The Afghans are well known as a particularly hardy nation—whatever their tribe or race—and Badakhshan is considered the most healthy province in the country. Marco Polo probably passed through the very area in which we were—he refers to it in his *Travels* as Balakshan—and spent some time there recovering from an illness; even in the thirteenth century it was known as a place where sickness was miraculously cured. Most of the diseases which plague the inhabitants of other regions were unknown here: there were no swamps and therefore no mosquitoes and no malaria; trachoma was rare, and so was cholera. The main illnesses were those resulting from lack of cleanliness; dysentery—in a far milder form than in Kabul—and sepsis. The first were, unexpectedly, unusual, whilst dysentery could be endured. However, the fact that the slightest cut tended to go septic was more serious, for the festering lasted a long time and left a scar if it was not attacked quickly with disinfectant. It was interesting to discover that mould from the flour-mills was sometimes used as a cure for this, a cure doubtless based on superstition, but which could possibly have some medical justification. So great was the ignorance about medicine, however, that they believed the injections which the doctors gave to be producers of fertility which would ensure copious litters of male children; so great was their ignorance of surgery that one man, who could not open his hand because of a horny growth in his palm, asked if he could borrow one of our machetes to cut the growth off.

We had not been very long in Boharak before such initial shyness as the villagers had felt had completely worn off, to be replaced by a very lively curiosity about us and, even more, about our equipment. At any time during the day there was a small crowd of children around our car, looking in through the windows, exactly like children in England looking at the Christmas display in a shop: they did not talk, nor did they touch, but just gazed with passionate interest at the multiplicity of dials and strange instruments inside. The highlight of interest in the car, however, came at about nine o'clock in the evening, for at that time we used to switch on the wireless to hear the news from England. After some time, we had a regular attendance of about fifty at this performance. There would be some quiet chatter as the aerial was adjusted, followed by delighted sighs as the light appeared, signifying that the wireless was on; a hush of expectation would fall when the first crackles were heard as the set warmed up, and the calm voice of the unseen announcer on the B.B.C. in London would command breathless attention as a hundred eyes riveted themselves on the car. It was amusing to turn to Radio Ceylon afterwards by way of contrast and to listen to the commercials which were invariably greeted by laughter at the voice's enthusiasm for "*Mobilgas, the double-powered petrol*", or "*So-o-o-othing Anacin, remember, ANACIN, for ALL your aches and pains*". Usually we could also pick up Radio Teheran or Kabul, or the Soviet station at Tashkent broadcasting in Persian, and the admiration of our entourage was unbounded when they heard that our little black machine spoke Persian as well as English.

One of the chief points of interest about our possessions was invariably their price. In Kabul I had already noticed this, and had received tempting offers for every vestige of my clothes when walking in the bazaar. Here, the interest was rather more academic, as there were few rich merchants, but we were all constantly being asked "*qeimāt—chand ast?*" ("How much did it cost?") of everything we had. Nobody

was surprised to learn the value of our car, but it was un-animously agreed that we had paid far too much for our type-writer. I was sitting one day writing an article when one of our invariable inquisitors appeared at my side, watching me with an interest which seemed unusually technical.

"How much did it cost?" he asked.

"Let me see . . . about two thousand five hundred *afghanis*," I answered.

"H'm. What is it for?"

"It is a machine for writing."

His eyes widened. "So you don't need a pen, then?"

"No. I press these buttons instead."

He looked at it very closely. "I see how it works. You paid *far* too much for it. I am going to make one for myself, and it won't cost even a hundred *afghanis*."

"But you can't make one of these. . . . I mean, one has to be a skilled workman. How on earth are you going to do it?"

He looked at me with pity, mixed with a craftsman's pride. "Of course I can make one, I'm a blacksmith. Then I won't have to bother to learn to read and write."

* * * *

The good impression produced by the wireless, the type-writer and, of course, our electric shaver was, however, badly offset by a sinister discovery which someone made about us. Like Don Basilio's slander, it flew from mouth to mouth, gathering impetus as it went, until it seemed that everybody knew about it. It was not long before I was asked to join a party of Tajiks at tea for an interview, during which it soon became obvious that I would be expected to issue a statement. The usual politeness and conversations about nothing, gradually working their way round to the point by an infinity of digressions—all this was cut down to a minimum, for an important question was in the offing. Soon, one of my hosts, unable to restrain his curiosity any longer, blurted out :

"*But where is your wife?*"

A buzz of approval greeted the pertinence of this question. It stopped abruptly when I told them that I had no wife, and that we none of us had wives.

"Then . . . how do you manage? Are you then so very poor? Or are women in *Inglistan* very expensive?"

I explained that in England we do not actually buy our women, but prefer to ask them to marry us instead. The expression of horror at this suggestion that one should treat a woman as an equal did not entirely stop when I hastily pointed out the resultant saving of money.

"What are your women like?"

"They are without exception tall, almost as tall as I am; their skins are the colour of milk; they have eyes as blue as turquoise and hair the colour of gold." With an inward apology to English womanhood I added, on remembering Oriental tastes, "and their hips are broad, very broad, like oxen."

Their eyes lit up hungrily. The fire died out again when I told them that even the very rich could only have one of these paragons each.

"I have ten thousand *afghanis*," volunteered a heavily bearded fellow, "which is enough to buy me a wife from the *kochis*, or two or three local women. If I gave it to you, could you possibly send me out one of the broad English women?"

I regretted my inability to assist. This did not raise their opinion of me, so I made haste to change the subject of conversation from one so detrimental to British prestige, and asked about the *kochis*.

"Oh, they are just people. Pathans of a sort—who winter in Kataghan and travel up from the Amu Darya (Oxus) plain in the spring to spend the summer at Lake Shiwa with their flocks. Most of our herdsmen go up there too—it is only a day's march to the north-east—for the pastures are very rich. Our people and the *kochis* share the pastures, they will all be coming down soon, as it is very high and will be frozen over in a few weeks. Do you see that building over there?" He

pointed to a large, low, mud building not unlike a caravan-serai. "That is the barracks of the *marz-bani*, the frontier police. They go up too, to see that we don't go too near the Russians."

"Really?" I asked. "But does anyone want to go near the Russians?"

Everybody laughed. "No, of course not. Some time ago they were all telling us that if we Tajiks went over to Russia we would have our own state—you know, Tajikistan; and they said the same about Uzbekistan to the Uzbeks. No one goes over from Afghanistan—they are all trying to come the other way, but the Russians stop them. The ones that do get across the Amu Darya have no wish to go back, believe me. Of course, around here, the Amu Darya is difficult to cross as it flows so fast, like the Kokcha, only bigger."

"And how do you get on with the *kochis*—I mean, you are Tajiks and they are Pathans. Do you have any trouble?"

"Oh no, they are quite all right—very rich too, by the way. We get on well with them. Their numbers seem to be getting a bit smaller though. Apparently the Government are trying to stop them from being nomads and to make them become farmers. The *kochis* do not like this at all and are doing what they can to resist, but I think the Government will win in the end. It will be a pity for us. Of course, we do not see very many of them just here, as they come down on to the main road a few miles nearer Faisabad, but when they do come here we get along well. They sell us sheep and cattle, and we sell them grain as they pass through. We think they are rather stupid, as they pay far too much for what they buy—rather like you," he added bluntly.

"Oh yes," continued the man with the black beard, "and their women are easily the best that can be bought here, and much the most expensive. Now if for ten thousand *afghanis* I can buy a *kochi* woman, surely you could . . ."

"No," I said firmly. "But can't you get a woman any other way than by buying her?"

"What's wrong with that? It is a very good system: one isn't meant to see the wares before they are paid for, but the bridegroom can usually get a little peep at her. . . . Actually, one can sometimes win a woman at *buz-kashi*."

"What on earth is *buz-kashi*?"

"Oh, don't you know what *buz-kashi* is?" asked someone else. "It's lovely. You get a dead goat and you fling it in the middle of a field and there are two sides and they rush at one another on horseback and someone picks up the goat and then someone else takes it and they all fight and get pulled off their horses and someone gets the goat and he wins," he finished breathlessly.

He had just given a concentrated version of the rules of the Afghan national game, which is played during the cooler months all over the country, but particularly in Badakhshan. The game is almost as simple as he had described it. Two sides, each of whose numbers may be anything between ten and sixty, are drawn up on horseback at either end of a large rectangular field rather bigger than a football pitch. A goat is slain and its blood drained from it; it is then thrown into a slight depression in the middle of the field. At a given signal, the two sides rush at one another, the object being to pick up the carcase—without dismounting—and carry it back to the end of the field. No holds are barred, and after a time the goat's corpse is pulped after being snatched away and fought over repeatedly. The only hope of retrieving it is to hide it—no easy feat—and then gallop away with it whilst the rest of the players are milling around. Injuries are common in this rather rowdy game requiring a very high standard of horsemanship, but "not many actually get killed". The side which gets the goat is considered to have won, and in exceptional cases an outstanding horseman is presented with a wife by his own side. The game, in a somewhat modified form, also takes place in Kabul in the autumn, when the two champion teams are matched in front of the King, although in this case the prize is of money.

The interest which all the men in the village displayed in women, and the ease with which the conversation turned, or, rather, was forced round, to this subject, was evidence of the extent to which they thought about it. We had not realized what a jealously-guarded commodity women were, even in Kabul where we had seen them so heavily veiled that they must have had no small difficulty in breathing. The trouble must arise very largely from the cult of the male, which is by no means exclusive to Afghanistan but is to be found in some degree in any Muslim country. If one asked a man how many children he had, he was quite liable to reply, "Two; and I have a girl as well." The recent disappointment in Jordan when the Queen gave birth to a daughter is proof enough that this attitude is not confined to the Afghans. The birth of a son is the signal for much rejoicing, for it means another man to work in the fields, an heir to his father's estate and a tribute to the father's virility. "May you bring forth men-children only" was once a standard Muslim greeting. As a result of this adulation, boys thrive and girls are ignored, and for some reason perhaps connected with this, the men in most Muslim countries, and particularly in Afghanistan, tend to outnumber the women, sometimes, apparently, by as many as two to one. In addition, there is the law which entitles a man to have up to four wives, making the shortage of women more acute. Few men actually reach this figure, partly because of the fact that wives cost money, both in purchase and in upkeep, and partly because there simply are not enough women. Many will lay claim to a large number of wives, just as some Englishmen might boast of a larger income than they actually have, but the reason is the same in both cases—prestige. One of the villagers of Boharak, less interested in the impression he made than most, admitted that he knew of no one in the area with more than two wives.

An Afghan man is invariably very careful to see that his women remain his and his alone. When approaching any women in the village streets, we always saw them turn away

towards the walls, even if veiled, and whenever possible they went into a house and shut the doors until we had passed. Only once did any of us see a Boharak woman unveiled: she had been fetching water with her daughter and we came across her by surprise. On seeing us, she got up with a little shriek and ran away.

Such seclusion of the women is bound to have its effect upon the men. Boys and girls are allowed to play together when they are very young, but a girl must take on the veil when she is about ten. Deprived of female company from that age until the day on which he obtains a wife, an Afghan boy has no choice but to band together with other boys. The results in Afghanistan are much the same as, although more exaggerated than, those which in our own country we hear of in our public schools. In Teheran we had already had some inkling of the truth—possibly prevalent throughout Islam—when we saw university students walking down Shah Reza Avenue hand in hand. In Afghanistan any suspicions we had had of this nature had been confirmed when on several occasions we had been offered the services of small boys: a few Afghan men, deprived of feminine contacts, had naturally found an outlet in homosexuality, a perversion which occurred in several parts of the country that we visited.

* * * *

One might have expected a valley as remote as Boharak to be more or less independent of the central authority, and indeed to be virtually lawless. In point of fact, the Tajiks, unlike their Pathan cousins to the south, who make the North-West Frontier such an unruly place, are a law-abiding people by nature, and Badakhshan could hardly be regarded as a thorn in the side of the Government. The administration rules through Ismail Khan, the Governor of Kataghan and Badakhshan, who had below him Jumei Khan, whom we had already met in Faisabad. Jumei Khan's province of authority was Badakhshan and Wakhan; for the latter area

he had a special Commissioner. Under the Governor—called by the English name—were a number of Commissioners, one for each village of any size, and under these were sub-Commissioners, one of whom was directly responsible for us. The work of these men is not unlike that of their colonial equivalents in British Africa: indeed, at first sight we were struck with the similarity between the British colonial and Afghan provincial methods. The Governor and his underlings are responsible for all that happens in the province and, in addition to the normal routine work, appeared to be responsible for such things as local engineering undertakings—for which they supplied advice and often supervised the actual labour—and the settling of quarrels between individuals. Usually the sub-Commissioner was one of a very small number of literates in his province, and the ramifications of his work were unending, as he was in the position of the father of a very large family.

The Commissioners' contacts with the villages were, at any rate officially, through the headmen, who fulfilled the role of mayors. They were responsible, amongst other things, for registering births and deaths and for seeing that the young men were sent to Faisabad at the appropriate time for their *pishk*, or national service in the Army. They also recruited labour for work on municipal projects, such as the roads, and were supposed to collect information for the tax-collector. Taxes were assessed according to a man's property—two *afghanis* per year for a sheep, three for a horse and four for a certain amount of land—and few made any effort to evade them, as they were so light.

Stationed in a barracks in the plain was, as we had already seen, the frontier police, or *marz-bani*. There were normally about a hundred men there, now reduced to a handful, as most of them had gone to Lake Shiwa with the pastoral element of the area and the nomads. Every year this migration took place, as the shepherds drove their flocks north to the uplands for the three months of summer, and the police went with

them, beautifully mounted, to ensure that no one strayed too near the frontier and that, in the unlikely event of there being any quarrel between the Tajiks and the Pathan *kochis*, it should have no chance of becoming serious.

The more we heard about Lake Shiwa, the more our curiosity grew. The lake lies at a height of some twelve thousand feet, and because it is only seven miles from the Soviet frontier it is only very rarely visited by foreigners: the last record that we could find of a European going there was the account of the two Italians, Caspani and Cagnacci, who visited the lake before the war and who brought back a collection of very fine photographs of it. The lake played a very important part in the life of the people of Boharak, and it quickly became obvious that if we were to produce a full regional survey, it should include a trip to Lake Shiwa. The various peasants whom we questioned about the march there were unanimous in saying that it was easy to reach in a day: as far as we knew, this would have involved a climb of six thousand feet over twenty miles.

'Ata Mohammed, when questioned about the lake, was very evasive. Yes, he thought it might be possible to go there, but not just now. . . . Later, perhaps, when we had finished with Boharak. When hard pressed, he agreed to ask the Governor, but for several days he made no further mention of either the lake or our plans. We decided to try to go on our own.

We had seen within a few days of our arrival in Boharak that there would be little chance of our ever escaping the vigilance of those whom 'Ata had posted to watch us. Already, when two of us had climbed one of the hills dominating the plain, we had been followed by a man who refused to be shaken off and who, being far more fit and more used to climbing, had no difficulty in following us round for half a day. On another occasion, we had gone up the Zardeh valley and had walked off *en masse* in the heat of the early afternoon from a mosque where we had had luncheon. This time, 'Ata had

had to follow us himself, as he had been unable to find anyone who wished to do the job when it was so hot; half-way up a stiff climb, we had split into two parties, as 'Ata could hardly follow both. The triumph of the two whom he did not follow, however, was short-lived. When they tried to move up a valley which had evidently been decreed out of bounds, they found their way blocked by a group of villagers who refused to allow them to pass, and they had to turn back.

In short, it would not have been easy, although we had our plans made as far as having settled the time at which we should leave—in the middle of the night—the route we should take and the way in which our escorts should be foiled. Somehow, 'Ata got wind of it, whether by simply overhearing the word "Shiwa" or by having seen us packing our rucksacks. He came up to me.

"I really *wouldn't* go anywhere, if I were you," he said. "You know the Frenchman you met in Faisabad? He tried to head up-country on his own. We later found that his permits to take photographs were not in order and he had to go back to Kabul. . . . I wonder whether he will be able to get the petrol to return to Faisabad. . . ."

"But we have no permits to take photographs either," I answered, slightly riled at the thinly-disguised threat.

"I know," smiled 'Ata, "that is just it. For the moment you do not need permits for photographs. But someone might one day discover *officially* that the permits had not been issued. You would have to go back to Kabul to get them, and people might be so angry at your oversight that they would refuse to allow you to use any more of our precious petrol to come back. You see? It is all very reasonable really."

I saw. The news was hardly welcome.

"Oh, by the way," added 'Ata, as if at an afterthought, "I passed on your request to Hakim Sahib Ala—you know, the one about Shiwa"—as if either of us had forgotten it—"and today is our day for the telephone. Shall we go and talk to him about it?"

'Ata and I went off to the hut in the village which housed the only telephone for miles around. As there are many villages on the line, each operator is allowed to use it only at certain fixed hours on certain fixed days; otherwise all messages have to go on horseback unless they are of great urgency. The operator was sitting at a desk in front of some very ancient British apparatus and sprang into action when 'Ata told him that he wanted to call Faisabad. "This will take a long time—it is a slow and painful business," 'Ata said, seizing me by the arm and taking me outside, where he smoked cigarettes and paced up and down, for all the world like an expectant father outside a maternity ward.

After three-quarters of an hour of this, a messenger was sent to tell us that the telephone operator had "heard something". 'Ata started, and we trotted back. In the hut, all was tense as the receiver was handed over to him. There were a number of exclamations of "*Balé*", followed by loud crackles audible on the other side of the room. From time to time 'Ata got hold of someone, only to discover, after numerous and very polite inquiries about his health, that the person to whom he had been talking was the operator at Faisabad. Finally his voice became very respectful as he handed the receiver to me. Hakim Sahib Ala was on the line.

The telephone in Boharak was for official use only, and there were none of the disconcerting "pips" at the end of each three minutes. Our conversation was free of charge, and the first six minutes were devoted to politeness and expressions of our own complete satisfaction with the way we had been treated, with 'Ata, with the telephone and with Boharak itself. Good, said the voice at the other end, with the insistence that if anything should be lacking we should not hesitate to let him know. How could anything possibly be lacking, I asked, in Boharak of all places? But, as it happened, there was one matter . . . no, it was not worth troubling His Excellency with it. . . . But His Excellency's talents were at our disposal :

we might ask what we liked, said the voice. Well, curiously enough, we rather wanted to go to Shiwa.

The voice sounded surprised. To Shiwa? But of course we might go to Shiwa. That is, that from the quarter of the Governor there was no objection at all. But Shiwa was a long way away. We might get tired on the way up. The route was difficult. Anyway, it was not very interesting. In fact, said the voice after some consideration, it was the least interesting place in Afghanistan. After climbing for many hours and getting very tired, we would come to an opening in the hills and there would be some water. That was all. Just water and hills. Quite the most uninteresting place the voice could think of, actually. Were we *sure* we wanted to go there?

Yes, I said, quite sure.

That was unfortunate, said the voice. Because, as it happened, there was another difficulty. Not that he, the Governor, had any objection to our going there: far from it—although he could not understand our wish to do so. But it so happened that certain parts of Afghanistan were out of bounds to foreigners. The Wakhan was one; Shiwa was another. Unfortunately, he could not authorize us to go there, and we had better be content with where we were. However, he could authorize us to climb our mountain near Kishm, an object far more worth while. With mutual assurances of esteem and of the pleasure with which we were looking forward to our next meeting, we rang off.

The answer was no. We had been unable to take a hint and had now been told as directly as was ever likely.

My own disappointment was great and, lacking both the courage and the ability to upbraid Hakim Sahib Ala, I turned, furious, on 'Ata, who had become the symbol of the restrictions placed on us. When I had had my say, 'Ata came in to the attack. He said nothing about us, but all his fury was turned on the enemies of Afghanistan who had made it necessary for me to be cross with him. He spoke of the wish of his country to live in peace with the rest of the world, of their

fear of Russia, of the unreasonableness of Pakistan in making things so difficult for the Pathans. He spoke of shortages of money, of recalcitrant Hazaras, of outside elements attempting to hinder the Government in their task of uniting the country. He said how he wished the British Empire were still active in India, for only with a force of great strength to counter-balance the Soviet Union to the north could Afghanistan hope to survive; now that there was a weak state such as Pakistan on the other side of the North-West Frontier, Afghanistan had no choice but to appease Russia. Now on the theme of the weakness of Pakistan as opposed to that of his own country, he shifted to a major key. He spoke of Pashtunistan as a *fait accompli*, of the Afghan Army and the Afghan tribes, of Afghan support for Pathan unity and of the horrible things that would happen to Pakistan if they ignored the repeated warnings from Kabul. Exhausted, he then explained that we would surely be allowed to go anywhere in Afghanistan when Pashtunistan was on its feet.

We returned to the camp together in the falling evening, to the smell of cooking *kebab* and the sight of the pyjama-clad figures of the others—for we had found pyjamas to be by far the most practical form of dress, being cool and protecting the whole body from sun and mosquitoes; and to the sound of voices raised in two languages above the roar of the river and the sighing of the poplar trees.

* * * *

The next morning, 'Ata seemed anxious to make up for the previous day's disappointment. He came up to us, saying that Majid the *mahigir*, or fisherman, had come to call on us, and did we want to watch him at work?

Majid was a tall, swarthy man with a most infectious grin and an air of complete independence. This latter was something he could well afford to have, for his trade brought him in twenty *afghanis* a day in summer at the least, and the hours he worked were his own affair. Fish was very much in demand

as a change from the mutton which was the staple meat of the peasants, and he knew that there would be little difficulty in selling all he caught. In winter, he told us, he worked in a sugar factory near Khanabad, for at that time the rivers dwindled to a trickle and all fishing ceased. The work in the factory kept him until he could return to Boharak in the spring to resume his more normal occupation.

He usually fished in the grey-brown waters of the Warduj or Jurm rivers, as apparently the mud in the water meant more fish, but we wanted him to work that day in the blue water of the Zardeh river by which we had camped, our reason being simply that it would make for better colour photographs. Majid did not understand this, and told us over and over again that he preferred the Warduj, his objection to the Zardeh being simple: "*Mahi nist*," there were no fish. However, he eventually agreed, shrugging his shoulders at our madness in wanting him to fish in a barren river.

Tied to his wrist with a long, fine cord was a round net with a cut in it towards the centre, so that when spread out it looked like the top of a cake with a small piece cut out of it. It had a diameter of about six feet, and around its edge were attached lead weights at intervals of about nine inches. The rope from Majid's wrist was attached to the centre of the net, so that when he lifted it, it became a cone. Using both his hands and his teeth, he arranged the net so that it would open correctly when thrown and waded into the shallows. In a moment he cast the net into the water; the net opened out fully in mid-air and landed on the surface, and immediately the weights started to pull it shut. He walked out and came in again with the net in his arms, and in it something white was struggling. Disentangling the fish, he threw it ashore and started again. In this way, the "barren" river yielded some twenty fish in half an hour, sometimes singly, once five at a time. They were called *zarcha*, *khal* and *shir-mahi*, and were all like very large and fat trout; like so many

other things in the valley, they had been noticed by Marco Polo.

Majid was not content. His catch had been too small. He gave the fish to us, still protesting "*mahi nist*," and wandered off to more fruitful waters.

* * * *

During our time in Boharak, we never once were allowed to enter the home of any villager who was in residence, and the only houses we saw inside were those belonging to people who had gone to Shiwa for the summer. Indeed, we had not missed very much, for on seeing inside one it was not hard to realize that in this at any rate there was little that was different from many other Muslim countries. The house was usually built around a centre court, with a granary and stables on one side and the family's living-quarters on the other. Where wood was used for the building, it was always poplar, and the long straight trunks made excellent beams for the roofs. The walls were of mud bricks strengthened with straw, as was the packing between the beams of the roof. The floor was of beaten earth, often on two levels with a difference of perhaps a foot between them; in the middle of the floor was a recess for fire. Such furniture as might be moved in with the owners was rarely more than a wooden *charpoy* (or bed) or two, an occasional carpet and cooking utensils. Often, however, in summer, the inhabitants of a house would build themselves a small hut of branches in their yards, or even outside the village, and by a main irrigation canal, where they would be away from the stifling heat which for some reason prevailed indoors.

If we were not encouraged to go inside private houses, there was one building where we were always welcome. Ever since our first trip into the village we had been struck by a very brightly painted and artistically decorated building, with a large porch and carpets, which was placed more or less in the centre. It did not take us very long to discover that this

was the mosque, and we were very surprised at the eagerness of all concerned to have us see it. With perhaps too obvious a show of consideration for their feelings we asked if we might go in, only to be greeted by an amused laugh which meant that of course we might go in, why did we ask?

The first thing that one noticed on entering was the wealth of colour and intricate, if primitive, decoration on the walls. The decoration could not, of course, be representative—for that would smack of graven images: hence the excellence of abstract design in Muslim mosaics elsewhere—but it had been done with great care. The predominant colour was a rich vegetable purple, with dark blues, reds and greens blending with it. All the decoration was painted on to the whitewashed walls, and for some reason this, coupled with the pillars of unpainted wood in the middle of the mosque, gave a curiously Alpine effect. The floor was strewn with straw and a number of people were sitting around inside, talking. It was indeed a very noticeable thing that the people in every village we visited seemed to treat their mosques, not as Christians treat their churches, but as a centre of social intercourse. There was none of the reverent hush to which we are more accustomed, but rather a hum of conversation, both in the mosque and outside it. Like Christians, they did not consider it necessary to be at church in order to pray; in any case a strict Muslim says his prayers at stated hours several times during the day, and far too often for a return to the mosque to be practicable on each occasion. They went there either to pray collectively or to talk; in the orchard behind the mosque the mullah held a sort of elementary school.

The mullah's position did not correspond very well with that of his English or even his Roman Catholic equivalent, the village priest. To begin with, Islam, whatever its ultimate effects on the thought and way of life of those who embrace it, seems to be far more of a living force in the life of the people than Christianity, and the mullah was the only man in the village authorized to teach it. He gained added

authority from the fact that he could read and write, and on the rare occasions when this was necessary he was willing to do either for any illiterate. He seemed to have considerable influence in the running of the new school which had just opened, and took on the responsibility of the very earliest stages of education of children, of whom he always had a large crowd around him. He was also probably the only inhabitant of the village who realized that we were infidels: where the others had let us into their mosque because they believed it to be our right as followers of the Prophet, the mullah had done so from more enlightened motives. He must, however, not have disclosed the fact that we were infidels for some time, for it was only when our stay was nearing its end that anyone asked us about our beliefs.

* * * *

One morning we awoke to find that the air was no longer as limpid as it had been before. It was only a very slight haze, but we realized that it must be coming as a harbinger of the end of summer. The monsoon does not, of course, reach this part of the world, but its effects are far-reaching: no doubt this was one of them, the final breath of the torrential rainstorms taking place beyond the mountains in the plains of India. This haze meant that we would have to finish our work fairly soon in order to catch the *kochis* on their autumn migration, and we made maps, questioned villagers and collected our specimens with redoubled energy.

Our main failure from a technical point of view had been Shiwa: had we been allowed to go there and talk to the *kochis* we should have had a very much better idea of how they lived, by what routes they travelled and of their reactions to the people through whose country they passed. However, the people of Boharak knew enough about them, so our failure to visit their summer pastures did not loom too large, although the fact that they travelled by night later made it very difficult to get many photographs of them. How-

ever, in view of the considerably shortened time which our long stay in Kabul and the slow progress over the roads had enforced upon us, we felt that we were being a qualified success. Our thesis on the plain could now be compiled, as we had enough material for it. As the days went by and we became more fit with walking from place to place, collecting specimens and asking questions of everybody we met, the empty boxes which were to contain the specimens gradually filled. The sight of John tramping about the countryside with a pickaxe over his shoulder—he used it in the absence of a geological hammer—became familiar to all and sundry; even Christopher with his butterfly net in hot pursuit of some insect now only excited comment when he sprang out of bed to enter the chase in his pyjamas—or sometimes out of them. Richard actually sometimes managed to get an unposed shot with the ciné-camera. And all the time the trophies accumulated—insects in little bottles marked DEADLY POISON, flowers in presses, strange-looking rocks, and soil samples in little plastic bags. The noise of the typewriter went on until the News every night.

We had seen little of 'Ata of late; he had been in the habit of looking in merely to see that we were all present. One morning, however, he sought me out.

"I hear that Lake Shiwa is freezing over," he said. "The *kochis* will be starting down in a week."

Chapter Seven

BOHARAK AND KISHM

THE haziness, a pearly diffusion which cut down visibility in the previously crystal-clear air and which marked the onset of autumn in these elevated areas, had become very noticeable by the middle of August, when we decided to leave Boharak. The glittering snow-clad peaks of the Pamir had vanished from sight several days previously, and, while the weather remained fine, it was now only possible to see the hills on the other side of the valley as a kind of brown, luminescent shadow looming up solidly, and yet in such a way that one could not be sure that they were there at all. The breeze which had caused a silvery rustle in the poplar trees on the edge of the river, a rustle barely audible above the growling of the waters, now arose at midday with redoubled force, making the air a little cooler as it rasped through the stubble in the fields, licking into life little dust-devils which danced madly for a few moments before sinking again, exhausted, into the ground, like a dry nylon stocking falling off a laundry line. Above, the sun still shone from an unclouded blue dome, but its rays were now blunted, had the cutting edge taken off them, by the newly-arrived haze, whilst the brilliant moon at night had a halo of gold. Summer in Badakhshan had nearly ended.

Travelling down the road to Faisabad made the change more obvious. On either side of the Kokcha river, now flowing with half its previous energy, the crops had been harvested, and the fields presented a brown, burnt appearance. Within a few miles after leaving Boharak, where we had bid a fond farewell to all our friends and where there had been a party from the village to see us off, we began to come across the encampments of the nomads, newly down from

Shiwa. We had to admit that they were far more colourful than the Tajiks and Uzbeks to whom we had become accustomed. They had very long black hair, and eyes of a slightly lighter hue; their clothes were variations of browns and reds, and the coats of the women and children had coins sewn on to them as talismans. We saw them from much closer up later on, but the first impression which they made on us was one of great independence and pride, confirming what we had been told, that the Government would have a difficult time settling them.

At Faisabad, we once more had to stay for a few days: there was one task which had yet to be accomplished, and we wanted to consolidate ourselves, as this would in all probability be the last leisured stop before Teheran—we had no intention of trespassing on the kindness of our friends at the Kabul Embassy again. However, the main reason for stopping was that we had heard tales of a stone near Faisabad on which was supposed to be engraved a Chinese inscription: this, had it proved to be Chinese, would have been a notable discovery. We asked around the town, and were rewarded with descriptions of many such stones. Some were carved into the shapes of animals by the wind and the weather, some had become known as landmarks and were marked. Only the *sang-i-sefid*, the White Rock, had any writing on it. Richard and I decided to go out and have a look for this rock, while Chris mended the car and John went shopping. We asked 'Ata about horses. He agreed that they would be useful, and set out into the town to find some.

Two hours later he returned, with two men who, he said, were willing to hire us their horses. A long palaver ensued, in which we negotiated the hire. Both the men were short and very squat, with faces like those of an Asiatic Tweedledum and Tweedledee. The beasts which they had brought with them looked wilted and lethargic, a trait evidently not shared by their masters, who set about bargaining with great energy and gusto.

"See my animal—the finest in Faisabad," said Tweedledum.

"As fine as mine," said Tweedledee, "almost."

"Worth forty *afghanis* a day, to you, *sahib*."

"Mine is worth fifty."

"Yes, mine is worth fifty too, but I thought I'd let the Sahib have it for forty. Perhaps forty-five, or maybe forty-eight, would be fairer. A horse such as this is expensive to keep up."

"And mine?" added Tweedledee, "if yours is worth forty-eight, mine, being better, is worth fifty-five. Let us say, sixty *afghanis* a day for mine, fifty for yours." Tweedledum and Tweedledee turned their countenances, united in happy agreement, to me.

Feeling that it was time we had some say in this game of soaring price-fixation, and yet unsure of my knowledge of Persian, I turned to 'Ata.

"Far too much," I told him.

Then, almost for another time since we had met him, we had cause to be grateful to 'Ata. He turned to Tweedledum and Tweedledee and accused them of being usurers and cheats. He told them the horses were not only the worst in Faisabad, but the worst he had seen, the worst in the country. He ran his hand over the horses, pointing out each little fault to the impassive pair, each sore, each scar and each blemish in the ornate saddles.

"These horses," he ended, "are old. I am not even sure that they are good enough for the Englishmen, they are so old. I am not even sure that they would carry them as far as they want to go. They would collapse and die on the way." Turning to us, he said in a loud voice, "I do not think you should take these horses. They are not good enough. Perhaps—well, I suppose you might give them five *afghanis*."

"As the *sahibs* might want to have a horse on another occasion," said Tweedledum urbanely, "and we would like them to hire from us, we will make it cheap. Thirty *afghanis* each horse."

"Seven, or you are a usurer."

"Twenty, or the *sahibs* have no justice."

"Twenty-five for both horses."

"Thirty-five."

"Thirty."

"Thirty."

The bargain had been struck. For the equivalent of half a crown each—an outrageous sum—we were to have the horses to take us to the inscription.

Badakhshani ponies—mostly stallions are ridden—were famous seven centuries ago for their qualities of strength and endurance, and Marco Polo mentions that a gift of these animals had been greatly appreciated by the Grand Khan. As in his time, they are mostly unshod, and the hardness of their hooves is apparently enough to withstand the battering of the rocks over which they walk. At first sight, however, they belie their reputation. Although they are obviously fairly well built and strong, if smaller than a European horse, they look extremely lazy and sleepy. This was a factor not without comfort to one like myself who had done little riding and who would never have contemplated sitting on a stallion had necessity not compelled it. Their saddles were also reassuring, with long and solid pommels to grip. We mounted, and after some persuasion set the horses in motion along the narrow and steeply-inclined streets of Faisabad, attracting no little attention from the few citizens who were still abroad in the early afternoon. As we came to the city gate, the soldier on guard gave us a salute before he turned to his field-telephone to inform the Governor of our departure.

Agonizingly slow though it seemed at first, the horses' pace was steady. A succession of hard kicks would make the animals break into a slow, shambling trot and, if combined with shouts, into a canter; but the animals preferred walking. They plodded away, slightly slower than walking pace, never varying speed, and crossing the most amazing variation of ground without so much as hesitating. The relentless onward urge was like that of a glacier or of a fifty-ton tank such as I

have sometimes driven through a thick wood, knocking over everything that was in the way, on manœuvres in Germany. The obstacles were different here, but the feeling was the same. The track led along the edge of a cliff and was about two feet wide, going up and down gradients where a man might well have used his hands as well as his feet; the horses did not seem to find any trouble in carrying a man along the path, and their hooves gripped the rock like limpets. Soon we had got used to the fact that they could take us almost anywhere a goat could go, and we were able to look around—at the hundred-yard-wide river to the left, with its eroded bank, behind which row upon row of rounded brown hills stretched to the snow-peaks, just visible, like a row of brilliant white fangs on the horizon.

After some two hours of riding, we came out into an open space, where we asked a farmer about the stone.

"It is there—*there*," he said, pointing at the river and leading us over towards the bank. "This is it." A white stone, its flat surface facing westwards and overgrown with fungus, lay before us. Under the fungus could just be discerned some writing which was definitely not Chinese—an inscription which was written in Arabic script and which we therefore assumed to be in Persian, and to be a discovery of no importance. It was only when we returned to England that we found out that the inscription was probably in Arabic and that it appeared to be a memorial of some battle which had taken place there in about the sixteenth century. The script was so ornate and the inscription so worn that neither we nor 'Ata, who had come with us, could make anything of it. We returned to Faisabad disappointed, feeling that the afternoon's ride had been in vain, and the ride back seemed endless: we did not realize that our photographs of the *sang-i-sefid* were going to excite considerable interest in England.

Once more on the outskirts of Faisabad, we found that the town's population had now emerged and was in the streets, and the passage of two Englishmen, with rucksacks on their backs

and looking like saddle-sore boiled lobsters, was the subject of much laughter and ribald comment from the men and youths who sat in the countless stalls which lined the streets. Donkeys trotted by, oblivious of us, the men on them uttering a guttural "*K-h-h-h-h*" to their mounts and an occasional salaam to us, but the vendors were far less busy and discussed us freely backwards and forwards across the street. Few people seemed to be buying from the vendors, who nevertheless looked prosperous enough in their little alcoves, where they sold fruit, groceries and hardware. In the central square there was a loudspeaker on a pole, emitting a curious howling noise which we found out to be Pashto. No one paid any attention to it.

Back at the hotel, news was waiting for us.

"Our stock of petrol was not enough to get us to Khanabad, so I applied to the Governor for some more," said Chris. "He gave us thirteen gallons straight from the tin. Look."

He produced a jerry-can and poured some of its contents into a dish. The liquid was pure white, and smelt of high octane. Evidently the scorn which we had so often heaped on the Russian refiners was unjustified—the water and the filth, as well as the purplish colour were all Afghan additions to what was basically perfectly good motor spirit in order to make it go farther. Strangely enough, the pure fuel was sold to us at exactly the same price as the adulterated; for some miles the engine of our car ran as it should have done.

Our departure the next day was preceded by the usual interminable wait for breakfast, and it was not until after luncheon that we were able to say good-bye to 'Ata, who seemed quite sorry to leave us. We gave him one of our cards, on which he had got us to write, in laborious Persian, "We had such a good time with you in Boharak, 'Ata Mohammed, and it was largely thanks to you. With much gratitude to you, 'Ata Mohammed, from the four Cambridge students." We never found out whether he wanted this as a souvenir of us or as a sort of reference which he could use to help his pro-

motion. Whilst preferring to believe the former theory, the latter seemed more probable, particularly in view of our somewhat strained relations over Shiwa. As we sat round the table drinking weak Indian tea from Japanese tea-cups and stirring in Russian sugar with plastic spoons from Pakistan, we were even assured that next time "when the trouble with Russia and Pakistan has subsided—in a year or so" we would be welcome to come back, and he, 'Ata, would see to it that we were allowed to go where we wanted. After shaking hands with quite a large crowd, only some of whose members we recognized, we started the car and moved off, across the rickety bridge which spans the river and back on to the road.

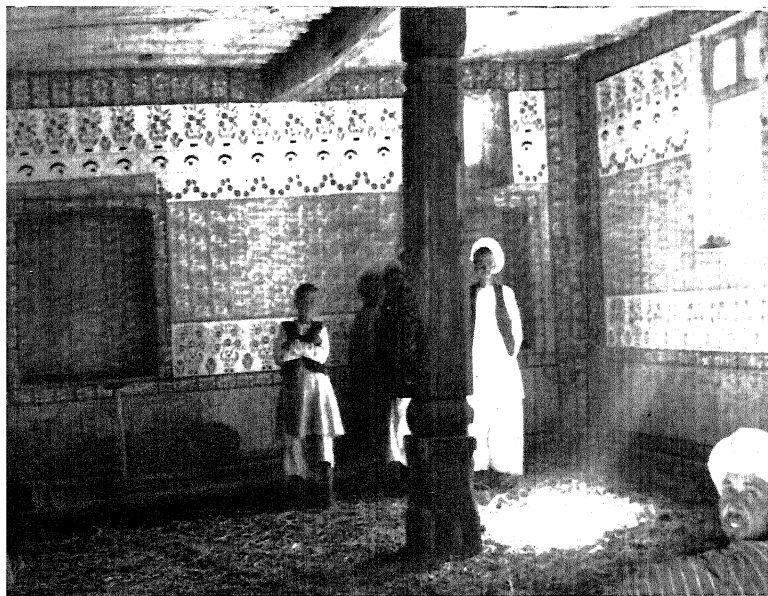
By bed-time we were only about forty miles farther on. On the road, we had passed a number of *kochi* encampments which had latterly been preparing to move. Even at this comparatively cool time of year, the *kochis* preferred to travel at night, and the only times we ever saw them on the move was at dawn or just after sunset. All through the night our sleep was disturbed by the snorting of the camels, the shouts of their drivers, the steady tramping of their feet and, behind it all and rising above it, as the clanging of a buoy rises above the noise of the sea, by the jangling of their bells—those camel bells whose clappers are, in fact, six or seven smaller bells fitted inside one another.

In the morning we had a surprise. During one of the short intervals in which we had been asleep, one of the caravans had spotted our camping site and moved in. The women were already busy setting up their tents as the men stood around us, staring. Getting out of bed in the midst of a crowd was a process to which we had become more than hardened, and it was quite without embarrassment that we were able to explain, still dressed in pyjamas, the functions of our collapsible beds, our sleeping-bags, our electric shaver—how we blessed that shaver!—and our field-glasses. While this was happening at the car, Richard, wearing nothing more than a soft hat and a pair of pyjama trousers, had rushed off a few yards to one

of the tents, and was now very busy taking ciné-film of the nomads. No one quite knew what we were about, but when the long inquisitive snout of the ciné-camera was joined by the unwinking blue eye of the Ikonta with which I hurried up to join him, the line was finally drawn, and we had to be satisfied with watching. Here again, the women were far less shy and took less trouble over veiling themselves than in any other part of the country that we had visited. They had no objection at all to our seeing them suckling their children—such little prudishness as we might have felt on seeing such a sight in England had by then entirely vanished and our only regret was at their dislike of our cameras—and their curiosity about us matched our own about them. They had dark, leathery skins, lightish eyes and black hair; their general appearance was of indescribable filth, but their almost aquiline features and independent mien gave them a haughty air. Inside their black tents were cooking-pots of beaten copper, beds, rolls of carpets and a few valuables, such as an occasional paraffin lantern. Each family had one or two dogs which, although very savage to strangers, displayed the greatest friendliness towards their owners.

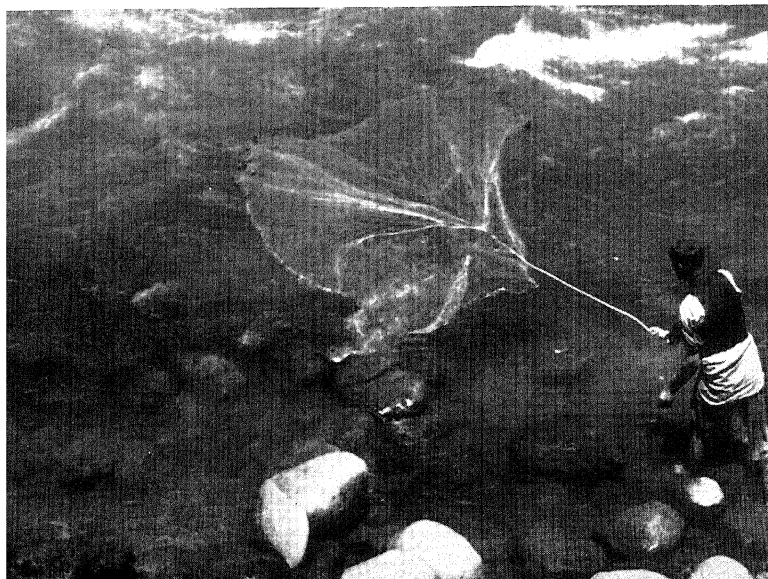
Back at the car, we learned that the men—who were all able to speak Persian to the inevitable group of Tajiks which clustered round them, although their usual language was Pashto—had been most interested in our property, and that we had been offered the equivalent of fifteen pounds for a pair of field-glasses. Money was beginning to run short, the glasses did not belong to us and were in any case insured . . . it was a hard struggle, but honesty won in the end—more because of a fear of being found out than because of any abstract belief in it as the best policy.

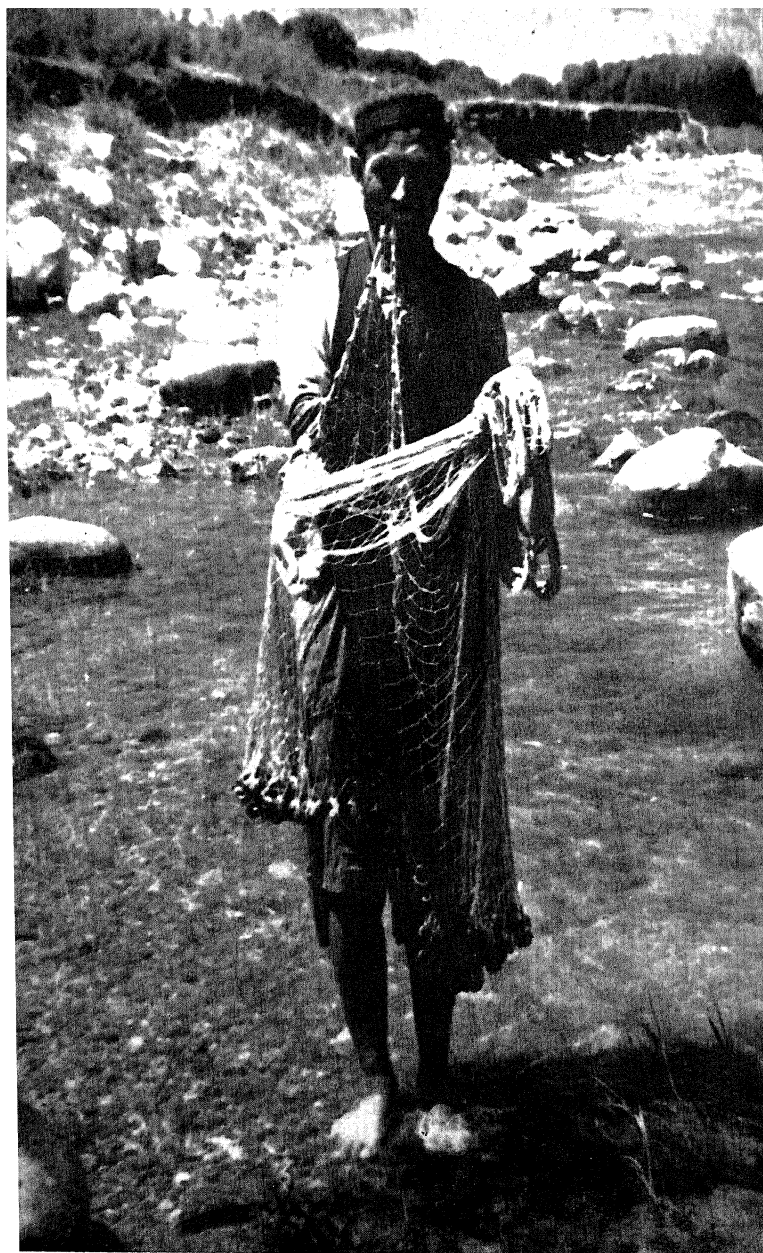
Soon, the inevitable Sick Man was produced. It is a curious thing, which has been experienced by travellers in many parts of the world, that the foreigner is always expected to have medicine with him which will cure anything. This time, the Sick Man looked remarkably healthy, as indeed did all the



Inside the Boharak mosque

Majid casts his net





Majid

kochis, no doubt due to their life in the open near Lake Shiwa, which is reputed to be where Marco Polo spent his convalescence after being ill in Kataghan. On being asked what was wrong, he could only reply that "it hurts".

"Yes, but where does it hurt? In your chest, your leg, your throat?"

"It hurts—*everywhere*."

"Yes, of course, but where does it hurt most?"

"Everywhere—here," a piteous moan, as he laid his hand on his chest, "and here," his hand moved to his head, wandered vaguely, and settled on his stomach. "I want a *pill*."

What could we give him? Our aspirin was finished. Sulpha drugs were far too precious and penicillin probably the wrong cure. "I know," someone said, fetching a bottle of tablets from the chest, "cascara. After all, his main complaint is bound to be imagination, and if we give him one of these it can do no harm and it could be just the thing." As the top was unscrewed the man caught sight of the tablets, and his distress overcame his manners as he snatched half a dozen and swallowed them quickly, with motions of deep gratitude.

"I *think* it might be for the best if we moved off before they have any effect," said Richard, at whose suggestion the cascara had been administered.

For some reason the road was crowded with flocks of fat-tailed sheep and very active small goats, and progress along it was very slow. To make it slower, the Kokcha, although now reduced in size, had managed to flood part of the road to a depth of several feet. As we travelled over one of the flooded parts, the car gave an agonizing lurch, travelled forward a little, and ended up on the bed of the river and in nearly a yard of water. The bottom was sandy and soft, and all our efforts to move it only resulted in its getting more and more bogged. As yet no one was unduly distressed, for there were trees in the vicinity and we had the winch which was bound to extricate us. So far the only damage had been caused by the entry of water into the back of the car, and even this had

only burst a few packets of washing powder, so that the floor was covered in a soapy blue foam.

The car's load was quickly brought on to dry land, and operations were then begun to do the same for the car. Here, as in most of the other things we did, we had only two men to do the work, as the other two were permanently busy taking photographs or ciné-film. Unfortunately, the engine would not start at first, and the sparking-plugs had to be removed and dried from an engine which was slowly but surely being immersed. Then the rope got tangled and stalled the engine as the winch started pulling. Then we realized that the fan-belt should have been removed and cut it instead. Then the sparking-plugs had to be cleaned and dried again. Finally, with a ponderous effort, the car heaved itself back on to the road, its engine turning furiously and blowing great clouds of steam.

"Look, it's frightfully silly, but I missed rather a good shot of the rope tightening round the winch. As we are now sure that we know how to get out, don't you think it might be worth while to go back into the river and get some really good photography?"

We all agreed that as we were there, and as we were quite sure that we knew how to get out, the delay of ten minutes or so was well worth while for the sake of a shot of the rope tightening round the winch, which was, of course, essential. . . .

Four hours later, the car was once more on dry land, and furious arguments were taking place as to exactly how one set about fitting a fan-belt when the winch drive led straight off the front of the engine and made it quite impossible to get around the pulley and it's a *horrible* bit of design and why the — are you taking such a long time, Chris, *you're* the one who's supposed to know about these things, not us, and if you're not quick we'll be here all night.

From up the road, a noise gradually began to make itself heard, not unlike the clanging of a buoy rising above the

sound of the sea, and before long we could hear the steady tramp of camels, their snorting, and the occasional shouts of their drivers who had made an early start that afternoon. They passed us in complete silence, a look of pity upon the faces of all except one, whom we recognized as the Sick Man. It might have been our imagination, but he seemed to fondle the dagger at his side rather longingly as he rode by.

* * * *

The engine now had to be drained completely and refilled with the only oil we had with us. It was gearbox oil and several grades too heavy, but when mixed with the water still remaining in the sump of the car, it became an emulsion of about the right consistency, whatever it lacked in lubricating properties. By the time the car was once more in a fit state to move, all hope of reaching Kishm that evening had gone, and we retired to bed some twenty miles farther on from the place where we had camped the night before.

Dawn found Chris busy under the bonnet trying to find an oil leak which evidently was likely to stop all further progress then and there, and he did not expect the car to be moving again for some hours. It was a bad moment. Not only had we spent an unpleasant night, being plagued by the mosquitoes which arose from the damp patches by the river, but we discovered that we had no bread and that all our matches were now useless. A passing group of Uzbeks gathered round us to watch as we argued over nothing, until finally one of us had the bright idea of asking where we could get what we needed. The Uzbeks now started talking heatedly amongst themselves, and one of them detached himself from the group and walked away. "Bloody useless people," we commented ungratefully, and set about shaving—once more to the tremendous delight of the onlookers—or swimming in the river.

Over an hour later, the work on the car was coming to an unexpectedly early end when the man who had walked away—in boredom, as we thought—returned to us, with a pleased

grin on his face and four of the round, floppy sheets of *nan*.

"I got these for you too," he said, pulling several packets of Russian matches from the folds of his gown.

Touched, and feeling not a little guilty at the thought of our previous ingratitude, I tried to give him twenty *afghanis*, which he refused, and asked him to join us for breakfast.

"No, no, I really must be going," he said evasively, "I must be off to my fields. *Shoma mehman astid*, you are our guests, and I could not possibly accept anything in payment for what I did. I would cook your breakfast for you too, but I don't quite understand that roaring fire of yours."

"Well it was very good of you to spare the time to fetch all this for us."

"Oh, that is quite all right. We may sometimes be short of bread, or of money—not at present, of course," he added hastily, "but we always have lots of time. Time is very plentiful in Afghanistan. I have heard that that is why *feranghi* from other countries are often in a hurry—apparently they do not have quite as much time as we."

So saying, he bid us farewell and left us, a diminutive and cheery figure sitting on a donkey, his red quilted gown billowing out to either side of him in the light breeze, giving his back view the appearance of a Michelin man gone puce.

We limped our way into Kishm that afternoon, the oil pressure warning lamp giving ominous flickers, and were greeted on arrival by a very cheerful Gul Mohammed. He seemed pleased to see us again.

"I've found out about your mountain," he warbled triumphantly, "unfortunately you can't see it any more, but it's the one at the end of the valley, isn't it? Well, its name is Hezrat-i-Mohammed, the Regret of Mohammed. It takes one day to get there, one day to climb it, and a day to get back; would you like to go tomorrow?"

It had been a notable feat to find out about this mountain, for as we had seen, he had no maps and all the village were singularly uninterested in something which in no way con-

cerned them or affected their daily lives. Gul Mohammed gave a few peremptory orders for the obtaining of horses for us before we asked him if we could get some oil for the car.

"I think you might be able to get *mublöyl* or *schél* in Khanabad," he told us; for some reason one did not ask for *rughan*, which is the normal word for oil, but for one or the other of the two proprietary brands which are the only ones to be found in the country—a request for *rughan* would have resulted in our being given cooking oil. "If you like, I will telephone and get some."

"But how do we pay?"

"That is quite all right. We have people running out of oil quite often here. What happens is this: I telephone to the Governor of Khanabad, who sends a man to the *mublöyl* shop. The right amount of *mublöyl* is then given to the driver of the bus to give to me when he next comes here—tomorrow, as it happens. Nobody pays anybody, except you can pay me and I will pay the bus-driver, or, if you prefer, you can pay at the shop in Khanabad."

This example of trust was no great surprise to us, for we were by now used to the remarkable honesty which prevails throughout the country, in such striking contrast to many other Eastern countries. One Afghan could happily trust another to pay for his oil perhaps several days after he had handed it over, and the same could apply to us. They were sure of being paid eventually, police and telephones notwithstanding. Similarly, shops in Boharak had offered us unlimited credit, illiterates had earlier asked us to count out our own change, and a carpet dealer in Kabul had allowed me to take a carpet on approval without paying for it and without asking my name or address. There is, of course, a very strong freemasonry of the roads in Afghanistan, which might have had something to do with the ease with which we obtained our oil. It was no unusual sight to see a lorry, with a load of perhaps twenty passengers, stopping for even half a day in order that the driver might assist a colleague in distress. In

a country where there is probably not a single breakdown van, where even if there were it would be almost impossible to telephone a garage, a breakdown, even of a fairly minor nature, can mean several days' delay, and it is an unwritten law that a driver who sees another in distress will stop to help him if he can.

In fact, many ingenious systems have been devised in order to meet possible emergencies. Apart from the usual "temporary" repairs which can be carried out with wire, collar-studs, knitting needles or string, repairs whose temporary nature eventually becomes permanent, there are some specialized repairs which are less obvious: a cracked radiator can be mended by breaking an egg into the water-tank, where-upon the white makes its way to the hole, where the heat of the water solidifies it; or the diaphragm of a petrol pump can be replaced with a piece of rubber from an inner tube. After a time a vehicle will have had a number of repairs similar to these, and the freemasonry of the road becomes an obviously necessary part of the country's transport system, as necessary to the Afghan lorry-driver as are the signals of other lorry-drivers to his English counterpart, given to warn him that a police car is "tailing" him.

As the rooms in the hotel were very small and stuffy, I moved my bed on to the roof, clearing a space for it amongst the grass which was growing in it and the tomatoes and red peppers which had been left there to dry. It was fortunate that I did so, for as a result I was woken at dawn by the singing of birds in the petunia garden and the noises of the village as people began to stir. On venturing out, we discovered that Gul Mohammed's minion had done nothing about finding horses for us, and that as a result a planned early start would probably have to degenerate into an early afternoon start.

However, things were not as bad as this. We repaired to the bazaar—a stretch of the street with shops instead of houses on either side of it—and were soon surrounded by a number of men, all of whom had horses for hire. Many of these were

either too small or too old for us, but with the help of the minion, whose name also turned out to be Mohammed, we chose four beasts which looked able to bear us for three days, and set out, at the steady shuffle which passes for a trot, on the route to our mountain.

We made a curious procession. Apart from ourselves—Chris looking awkward in a green Aertex shirt and waterproof American hat, John grim in a pair of Army boots and puttees and with an ice-axe over his shoulder, Richard neat and tidy in a nicely pressed pair of trousers, and myself odd in a karakul hat and carrying a pair of cameras—we had amassed a considerable following. Firstly, there was Mohammed, who wore a pair of baggy black pantaloons, the coat of a European suit and a white *lungi*, or turban; his fine features, well-shaven cheeks and thin moustache, combined with the pair of sun-glasses which he wore, made him look like a well-to-do Frenchman on holiday in the South of France; he smoked a cigarette in a cigarette holder as he rode, and was a superb horseman. Then there were the owners of the five horses, whose services we had apparently hired, together with those of the horses, for twenty *afghanis* per day; they walked along beside their animals and kept up a constant flow of chatter. Bringing up the rear of the procession was a particularly vicious and recalcitrant stallion, on to whose back had been loaded our four sleeping-bags and as many rucksacks. Cross-legged on top of these was a boy of about eighteen; the whole arrangement looked like a drum-horse and drummer. Finally, riding with Mohammed was a singularly tough man who was introduced to us as the *buz-kashi* champion of the whole of Badakhshan, and whom we accordingly named Buz-Kashi. He wore only a purple robe over his immensely broad chest, which he displayed with a broad grin, uncovering a row of teeth like the crenellations of a castle and stained red at their bases.

"He has won several wives at *buz-kashi*," explained Mohammed. "As you can see, he is very strong." As it hap-

pened, he was also very intelligent, proving to be a most entertaining companion.

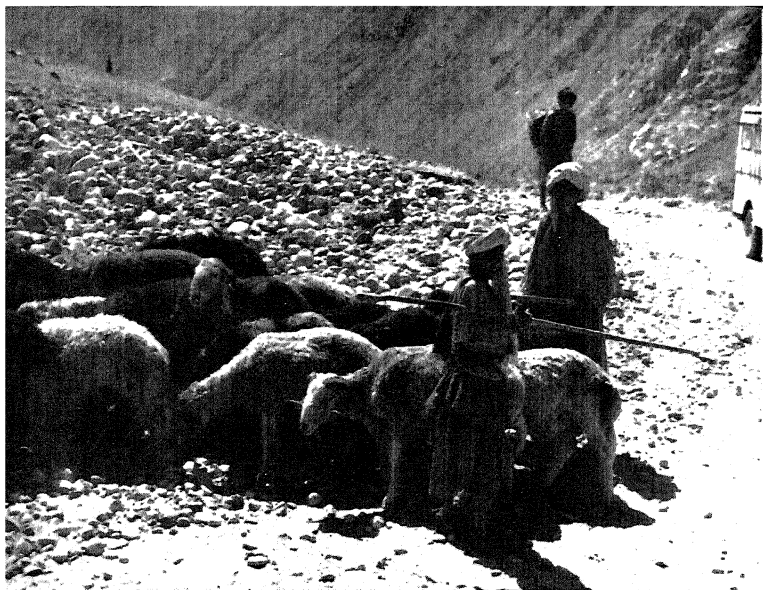
Soon after leaving the town, we were able to break into a gallop by kicking the horses as hard as possible and screaming into their ears, but the horses' natural antipathy to such strenuous activity as galloping was quickly justified as the track began to lead through dusty brown hills strewn with melon fields and became narrow and fairly steep. Our cortège soon slowed to a walking pace under the hot sun. Before very long, everyone came to a halt by a field where a pair of men had collected two sackfuls of melons. After a welcome pause to buy some for the whole party, we moved on—in actual fact we only paid officially for our own melons, while the others apparently got theirs for nothing; but our own were sold at such an astronomical price that we could only imagine that the spirit of Robin Hood was at work even in this area, so remote from Sherwood Forest. The track then became so narrow that we had to go in single file. Through the dust thrown up by the horses, one could see to either side above or below us more *kochi* encampments. Then there came a moment which made even our phlegmatic ponies shy nervously, as around a bend appeared a convoy of a score or so of camels, heading in the opposite direction. The horses came to a dead halt, unable to bolt sideways—because of either a cliff or a steep drop—and equally unable to turn round as the camels edged past on the inside, one by one and with the dogged forward impetus that marks the unheeding progress of a herd of cows across a main highway. Finally, a series of hairpin bends brought us to the top of a pass and we were able to look down upon a small silver stream, with nomad encampments dotted to either side of it and a small village in the distance.

"That is Lower Khombok," said Buz-Kashi, "we are about half-way."

Lower Khombok proved to be a wretched little place, built on a steep slope and miserably poor. One or two scrawny



Work in a rice paddy;
an eroded hill is shown in the background



Young shepherds with a herd of fat-tailed sheep

The *kochis* make camp



chickens, which pecked listlessly about in the main street, and an emaciated donkey were all that was to be seen abroad: to either side, almost brushing our elbows as we rode along, the mud walls of the houses stretched, windowless and forbidding. One of the wooden gates was open and after we had dismounted Mohammed led us through it into a large and dirty courtyard. On one side of the courtyard was a wooden porch, to which carpets were brought and spread on the floor; a man then appeared with enormous cylindrical cushions and motioned that we were to rest. After a wait of about an hour, a luncheon appeared which consisted of tea and a dish of eggs fried in vegetable oil and sugar. No one seemed unduly worried by the possibility of our catching Kabulitis from this very unsavoury-looking plateful, from which we had to eat communally and with our hands.

Before very long, Mohammed called us. We remounted, already feeling very stiff—and set off again along the track. The countryside slowly changed character as the horses plodded their tireless way along the valley of the tiny stream, which they crossed and recrossed, splashing through the icy water. Already the sand and scrub of the morning had been left behind and had made way for grass and poplar trees. Now, with the aneroid barometer reading about six thousand feet, the scenery became reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands, with gorse and stunted conifers growing amongst rocky grey hills. The men who had accompanied the horses plodded on, talking volubly and laughing from time to time; Mohammed and Buz-Kashi, better mounted, rode on ahead followed by us; a hundred yards behind was the pack-horse which, in spite of its enormous load and of the distance which it had already covered, was quite fresh enough to throw the boy who rode it and to cause a great deal of trouble. I always liked that horse: it seemed to have a sense of humour. Easily the biggest of the five stallions we hired, it showed an ominous placidity in the market square in Kishm until the baggage was loaded on to its back. It then bolted and had to be caught,

after having dislodged all its load so that everything had to be tied on again. During the morning's ride, it had learned much from its master, so that it could now specialize in making him lose his temper. This it did by walking very tranquilly for a few miles until the boy's attention wandered; as soon as this happened, the horse would throw him—usually showing much consideration by finding something soft to throw him into, like a pile of prickly dried branches or of camel dung; it would then wait until the boy had got up, and trot along contentedly, just out of his reach, until it tired of the game and allowed itself to be caught, submitting to the resultant beating with complacent stoicism. My own horse seemed to be a particular friend of the pack-horse and was always trying to drop behind so that they could be together; whenever they met they would snigger together at the joke.

A few more hours' climb took us to Upper Khombok, where we were parked in the garden of the mosque to stretch our cramped legs—all the stirrups were far too short, and the taller of us suffered correspondingly more—and to drink tea. Mohammed and Buz-Kashi now told us that they could take us no farther, as they did not know the way. They wished to introduce us to our new guides, men from the village, who knew the route up to the mountain and who were ready to take us up. Mirza was a tall man with a long grey-brown beard whose eyes had the shrewd, suspicious look of a French peasant; he spoke little and seemed somewhat contemptuous of us. Hassan, his companion, made up for Mirza's silence by a loquacity that was as overpowering as it was incomprehensible.

Mohammed explained that before we could leave Khombok there was a small formality to be observed. He handed me a piece of paper and a pencil.

"I cannot write today," he said, "because of my hand . . . it is very sore. Please take down the following: '*I, Mohammed of Kishm, am handing over to Mirza and Hassan, of Upper*

Khombok, the bodies of four English Males, the property of Hakim Sahib Gul Mohammed.' . . ."

"What on earth is all this about?" I asked in amazement. "Have I understood you aright?"

"Of course, of course," replied Mohammed soothingly, "it is *hekumati*—purely a formality that we have to go through for the Government. Like this, Mirza will not take you away and do things to you . . ." he went on vaguely. "Please write, '*They are alive and in good condition. Mirza and Hassan promise to bring them back in the same condition within three days.*' " They all signed their names at the bottom of the receipt—they could all sign, even Mohammed, whose hand seemed to have mended miraculously for the occasion—and the paper was handed to Buz-Kashi as an impartial arbitrator. Buz-Kashi grinned, showing once more his horrible red teeth.

"I'll look after this for you," he said to us. "You see, if it gets lost, there will be no one to account for you." We could not help thinking of the fate that overcomes equipment which is not accounted for in the Army: it is usually sold to a civilian dealer by dishonest storekeepers. The practice of signing receipts for foreigners must have originated in the time when there was a flourishing slave-trade in Afghanistan.

We rode on for a few hours up an ever-steepening path until evening, and then stopped for the night by the same stream that we had been following. Nearby was a small settlement, from which at first only the barking of innumerable dogs could be heard. A flat space was found, on which a rug was spread for us; we collapsed on to this, tired out by the day's unusually strenuous exercise.

About fifty yards below, the little stream tinkled; above us, the opposite side of the valley grew slowly red as the sun went down. With the suddenness usual in these parts, the shadows of the stunted conifers and thorn-bushes lengthened until the sun hid behind the mountains, leaving only olives and purples on the darkening countryside.

It is an extraordinary thing that the eye, only too alert at first to what is strange in a country new to it, gradually finds its perception growing blunted as the unusual becomes familiar, so that it eventually takes for granted things at which it would earlier have registered considerable surprise. I had no time to ponder on this fact when, groggy with fatigue and the altitude, I realized with a start that something very unusual was passing before me. It was a man, clad in the local costume, walking along leading a donkey; on the donkey's back was the body of what seemed to be a woman, her head and shoulders entirely shrouded in a thick red cape, her hands tied together behind her back and her feet joined underneath the donkey's belly by a length of rope. What was she doing? Why the red cloak, of a colour and pattern unexpected? Why was she trussed up so, if indeed it was a woman? And where was the man taking her? Mirza, when asked, exhibited no curiosity, merely shrugging his shoulders and saying that no doubt the man with the donkey knew where he was going; it was none of his, Mirza's, affair. The donkey and its burden soon vanished into the gathering darkness, leaving behind them echoes of a gravely exchanged *salaam aleikum* and a sense of curiosity, previously almost dormant, now completely awake.

A dignified elderly man appeared at our side. He was the chief of the settlement and wished us to consider ourselves his guests. The words "*shoma mehman astid*"—words that we had already heard over and over again in Afghanistan, the words of welcome to the foreigner—were on his lips as he told us that he would be arranging dinner. As it happened, we had already eaten from some of our tins, but the offer could not be refused. A chicken was brought out and a fire lit. Round it gathered about a dozen men, either from the settlement or from those who had come with us. The chicken was fried with butter in a clay pot, and then distributed. The flickering light of the fire illuminated a circle of hairy Asiatic faces as the men talked interminably. Finally, after everyone

had had a few puffs from a *chillum* brought from one of the houses, the fire was doused, sending up great clouds of smoke and steam, and we were allowed to go to sleep. The night, apart from being slightly uncomfortable owing to the stoniness of the ground, was rendered hideous by the howling of a number of semi-wild curs which had been attracted by the smell of the cooking and now came to attack us; they had to be beaten off with sticks every few minutes.

It seemed only a few minutes after the dogs finally gave up and allowed us to sleep that Hassan was whispering in our ears that it was dawn, time to set off again. My watch said half-past four; a blue-grey light permeated the valley and there was a chill in the air. Ice formed by the condensation of our breath crackled on the sleeping-bags as we unwillingly got up. After a perfunctory wash and a very quick breakfast, we were once more heading up the path, this time with our luggage on our backs, and only able to ride the horses on the flatter stretches. Rounding a corner, we were able to see our mountain for the first time. Not a vestige of snow lay on its rounded slopes—indeed, it was hard to believe that this could conceivably be the snow-capped peak that we had admired from Kishm three weeks earlier. None of us had been expecting another Everest, but we were all bitterly disappointed at the lack of snow. Somehow snow would have made all the difference to our story—perhaps we had been visualizing phrases appearing in newspapers on the lines of “having faced temperatures ranging from a hundred and twenty-five degrees in the Oxus plain to the glacial heights of the eternally snow-clad Hindu Kush, four Cambridge undergraduates returned to England today . . .”; perhaps we had really wanted to achieve a difficult climb—as the morning drew on and as we grew even more short of breath I began to doubt this; perhaps we had pictured ourselves on coloured photographs against a background of blue and white; whatever the reason, when we saw our peak, we were all furious, and had no hesitation in blaming it all on Mirza.

"Are you *sure* this is the mountain?"

"Why, yes, of course. Hezrat-i-Mohammed. This is the one for sure, *sahib*."

"But then why is it so small? (*Severely*) This is a Government plot to keep us away from our mountain."

We were all slightly unbalanced about the Government by then.

"That's it, of course," chimed in someone else. "Bureaucrats in Kabul. *Keeping us from our mountain.*"

"It all fits in with Shiwa. They wouldn't let us go there either," said someone else. "And for the same reason."

"Why, do you think?"

"*They don't want us back.*"

"Mirza, is this a big mountain before us?"

"Yes, *sahib*," replied Mirba, puzzled. "A very big mountain. The biggest around here."

"Then why," I asked triumphantly, "is there no snow?"

Mirza was very puzzled by now. "The snow has gone, *sahib*." He drew the words out, speaking slowly, deliberately, as if he were speaking to a cretin. "Three-e-e-e we-e-e-ks ago, there wa-a-a-as sno-o-o-w. But no-o-ow, it's go-o-o-ne." He spread his hands. "Go-o-o-o-ne," he moaned, unable to understand our interest in something that was to him only a nuisance.

"Is this the highest mountain anywhere near here? Are you sure that you are not taking us here because it is easy?"

"It is the highest mountain in all the region: the highest mountain in all Afghanistan; it is the highest mountain in the world. At least, it may not be the highest," he added hastily, aware that we might know better than he, "but it is without any doubt whatsoever by far the best."

"He is lying."

"A Government tool."

"A congenital idiot."

"Spies."

"Awful frustration."

"What I'm going to tell them in England . . ."

"... not coming here again . . ."

"*Fool.*"

"Oh well, as we're here we'd better climb it."

As the sun rose and the day grew warmer, our bad temper evaporated. It would be less of an achievement than we had expected, but that was the worst of it. Our party now consisted of only ourselves, Mirza, Hassan and one other local who had come to help with the horses. Had the saddles not been so uncomfortable, we should have been able to ride to a height of some thirteen thousand feet; as it was, we left the horses, who were only just beginning to weaken in the rarefied air, at a place where our aneroid read that we were just over twelve thousand feet above sea-level. Only Mirza accompanied us to the top, an easy two hours' climb over stony ground. After dismounting, he removed his shoes and hung them round his neck, explaining that it was very expensive on leather if he wore them for climbing. He reached the summit on his bare feet. On arriving at the top, we found a cairn with a number of goat horns in it, as well as one pair that could only have belonged to an ibex. We also found a small patch of snow. Pleased at this, and at the thought that after all no foreigner had ever climbed this mountain as far as we knew, we planted a flag. It was not a Union Jack, nor was it an Afghan or United Nations flag. It was the house-flag of the Fina Petroleum Company, a relic from the gay decorations which had covered the car in France.

* * * *

There was little to see at the summit, as the mist did not lift enough to reveal a view of more than the outlines of some of the nearby mountains. A cold wind was blowing, and we were experiencing the slight nausea which comes from exercise at high altitudes—it was, according to the aneroid, nearly fourteen thousand feet above sea-level. We had a short rest before moving down again. The climb had taken six hours, and

thanks to our early start we reached our camp in time for a late lunch.

The same courteous old man bade us welcome and sent for food. This time it was food of a rather more unusual character. A wooden bowl, containing a thick whitish liquid, was placed before us with lumps of bread. It was called *qaimok* and tasted nauseously sweet, with something that looked like damp blotting-paper floating around in it. It would have been rude to refuse this concoction, which was made of sheep's milk, and we were, in addition, hungry; the first edge of hunger removed, however, we agreed that the less exotic varieties of Afghan food, such as *dukh*, were infinitely preferable.

Soon we had all, to our surprise, sufficiently recovered to be able to face the prospect of a twenty-odd-mile ride back to Kishm with equanimity. My own choice was to go on foot, as the prospect of another six hours in those agonizingly short stirrups was more than I could face. Accordingly, we set off back to Upper Khombok. The formality of the receipt was once more completed, and the owners of the horses and Mohammed joined the party. We rode on down the same valley in exactly the same way as we had come, with the humorous pack-horse, now well rested, bringing up the rear in fine style and in his characteristic way. The Tajiks from Kishm accompanied their own horses, plodding along untiringly. One boy attached himself to me, as he had found out about the cameras around my neck. All the afternoon he pestered me to take his photograph, and to take the photograph of everything we passed.

"Look," he would say, "there is a girl [a tree, a house, a man, a donkey, a horse, a lizard, a boy, a field or a patch of grass]. Make 'aks.'" His encouragement grew intolerable, and I had to simulate lameness in order to make him go on ahead, eager for home.

The long trip back seemed interminable. The sun set while we were still an hour away from Kishm, but soon the tired

horses recognized where they were and walked on with renewed vigour. In Khombok, the man who owned my horse had bought a chicken which had caused the other horses to shy each time he approached them with it under his arm. The chicken was now tired out and only gave a peevish squawk when it found itself being jostled in the lamplit streets of Kishm. Just before I handed the horse back, the man wrung the chicken's neck. The chicken made no fuss, it merely expired quietly : no doubt it was feeling the worse for wear.

Chapter Eight

THE LAST DAYS IN AFGHANISTAN

MOHAMMED, indefatigable, had ridden on ahead into Kishm, and by the time we had drawn up our horses in the petunia garden and had paid the men from whom we had hired them, we did not have long to wait before dinner was brought in. Chicken, rice, melon and water from the *jui*—which we now drank without so much as a second thought—appeared on the oilcloth-covered table, and afterwards we felt more than ready to retire to the hard comfort of the wooden *charpoys*: before I fell asleep, I calculated that in the last sixteen hours we had walked twenty-five miles, ridden four, and included a climb of seven thousand feet and a descent—far more tiring—of eleven. Life in Afghanistan had made us fitter than we realized.

In the morning, we were pleased to find that Gul Mohammed had been true to his word, and that two gallons of Shell engine oil were waiting for us. Gul Mohammed himself had moved off somewhere—we were later to find out where—and had sent his apologies for not being able to see us. We loaded the car and went through what was by now the all-too-familiar ritual of shaking hands with everybody we saw, and of thanking all and sundry for a pleasant stay. After a quick glance up the valley, where Hezrat-i-Mohammed lay veiled in mist, we moved off.

It was not until the heat of midday—still no mean thing in spite of the lateness of the season—had well and truly set in that our progress met with any obstacle. As we rounded a bend in the tortuous and narrow road above the Khanabad river, we were surprised to see a large number of men gathered round a lorry and, farther on, to see even more men, apparently busily at work at one of the many times of the



Kochi children; their father relaxes in the background



Rebuilding the bridge into Kataghan

The test : Gul Mohammed is nearest the camera,
wearing a suit and topee



day which are set aside for rest. We were motioned to a halt and bidden to remain inside the car. In a few moments, looking ultra-colonial in a suit of khaki drill and a topee of the same colour, Gul Mohammed trotted up to us.

"Good morning," he said, his voice sounding like a water-whistle, "you . . . cannot . . ."—he paused, evidently at a loss for words, and then brought out explosively—" . . . go!"

We could not go.

"Why?"

"The *pul* . . . it is be-ro-ken. Two days. We fix."

"Do you mean money or bridge when you say *pul*? Because we have no money."

"No, no. Ber-idge," Gul Mohammed warbled happily. His voice grew even gayer as he explained how it had happened. "A lorry fell through. Very heavy. Fifteen metres he fell. Six men in the lorry. The lorry was broken—we have sent it to Khanabad and they will fix it. Two men dead—not fix. Four men okay."

We went and looked at the damage. It had been one of the typical bridges to which we had now grown quite accustomed, but the weight of one of the inevitably overloaded lorries had broken its back and it had fallen the best part of fifty feet down a ravine. How any lorry could be worth salvaging after that was more than we could imagine. A few yards farther along there was a scene of tremendous activity. Several hundred coolies were at work in the heat of midday on building a new bridge. As this was the only road into Badakhshan from any direction their urgency was perhaps understandable, particularly when it transpired that an order had come from Hakim Sahib Ala himself to complete the work with despatch. They were at any rate making sure that the new structure would last longer than the old, and had built up great piles of stones on either side of the ravine, so that the actual bridge would not have to be more than fifteen feet long. Now they were laying poplar trunks across the gap. A lorry was parked on the Khanabad side of the ravine, and

men were busy unloading it and carrying huge cases from it to another lorry which was waiting on the Badakhshan side. They balanced their way across the poplar trunks amazingly well, for it would have been easy to slip between them into the ravine. After the laying of the long trunks was completed, more were laid cross-wise, and the whole thing was packed with earth and straw. Every so often there would be an agonized "A-a-a-a-a-h", and everybody would down tools and rush for cover as a charge of dynamite sent earth and rocks flying high into the air in order to clear an approach to the new bridge.

"It should be ready soon, shouldn't it?" we asked Gul Mohammed.

"*Insh' Allah*, a few hours."

"How many hours?"

Gul Mohammed grinned. "Afghan hours, or hours on your watch?" he asked enigmatically. "Please come. We will have lunch in my little house."

He drew us over to his little house, which proved to be a sort of open hut, built specially for the purpose, of leafy branches, and a welcome refuge from the sun. Carpets had been laid on the ground and some huge cushions were there for us to rest our backs against. We sat down and awaited developments, talking to Gul Mohammed. Every so often a man would appear at the entrance and ask for advice. "Please, Hakim Sahib Gul Mohammed, where shall I put the straw?" "Please, Hakim Sahib Gul Mohammed, one of the logs has fallen down." "Please, Hakim Sahib Gul Mohammed, I've hurt my finger." Each time someone came in, Gul Mohammed would patiently rise, excuse himself and go out to deal with the problem. Even when we were enjoying a delicious luncheon of pigeon stewed with plums and rice, he was always ready to go and deal with even the smallest matters as they arose. Our amusement at his comic English quickly changed into respect; for we soon found out that the design of the bridge, as well as the responsibility for building it, was

his own. District Commissioners have to be able to take problems such as this in their stride.

It was early evening when we heard that the bridge was ready.

"I don't really know what my new bridge is like," Gul Mohammed said. "I have never built one before. We will start by testing it with something not-very-heavy." He looked around vaguely, starry-eyed. "You."

Christopher boarded the Land-Rover as the rest of us stood by like a gang of Press-photographers. Slowly he moved up to the new bridge, took his courage by the scruff of the neck and drove across, to the loud cheers of the coolies, who seemed frankly surprised at the quality of their handiwork. Dozens of bearded Asiatics thronged around us, excitedly shaking us by the hand and even embracing us, delighted for our sake that we had been able to cross, and more than a little pleased with what they had achieved in a matter of a day and a half. Gul Mohammed came to our side as we clambered aboard.

"You are now in Kataghan," he said. "The road to Khanabad is clear. You may go." With a grandiloquent gesture, he waved us out of his domain.

* * * *

On arriving in Khanabad the next day—with about half a pint of petrol left in the tank—we were relieved to discover that it was not market day. However, as we were almost out of money—all our remaining funds being in Kabul—we decided to sell one of our old tyres which was of no further use to us and which could be used locally for making soles of shoes. The citizens of Khanabad were not in the least surprised when we asked them where we might sell our tyre, for an intelligent Town Council had foreseen the need for somewhere for such a transaction to take place, and had thoughtfully decreed that Englishmen with tyres for sale should repair to the Customs

Yard—the *meidan-i-gumruk*—where there would always be someone to see to their needs.

The *meidan-i-gumruk* was a large open space crowded to capacity with broken-down lorries in various stages of dismantling; cannibalization of those which were obviously too old and feeble to be worth preserving was taking place freely. A number of beds were brought up and placed in positions convenient for social intercourse, tea was produced from a nearby tea-shop kept by a small boy, and eventually bargaining began. This time, however, the method used was either twice as honest or ten times as subtle, for when we, as usual, asked twice as much as the tyre was worth they immediately agreed, so that, shame-faced and conscience-stricken, we had to reduce our price and end up by receiving about one half of what, had we bargained properly, would have been a fair price.

As soon as we could muster the energy, we rose from our bargaining-beds and drove through the town with its bright sunshine, shady trees and whitewash, loaded up with petrol and set out again. As we crossed the short patch of desert before once more joining the Qunduz river, we noticed that the carcase of our mountain lion, now somewhat shrivelled, was still keeping its lonely watch in the telegraph wires, still for no apparent reason and miles from anywhere.

Soon we were back in the Hindu Kush, and Badakhshan was only a memory occasionally brought back to us forcibly by the sight of a veiled woman silhouetted against a sunset with a row of poplar trees, or by the sight of an early moon, half hidden by a mountain, shining in the sky like a single horn belonging to some celestial devil. We drove until late, anxious to get to Kabul quickly, and as we went we were able to hear concerts broadcast to us from London: one, including Mozart's fortieth symphony, came over particularly clearly, contrasting oddly with the noises of the town through which we were passing. The Shiba was crossed uneventfully, so that we were following the Ghorband river on the southern side

of the watershed within forty-eight hours of leaving Khanabad. We spent our last night in the Hindu Kush in almost exactly the same spot where, nearly two months previously, we had awoken to see a band of sinister men from the village moving up to our camp. This time, there were no shouts of "Who are you?" from the people around. Perhaps it was merely that they had not seen us; or perhaps it was that they remembered us and felt they knew us, even as we thought we had begun to know them.

* * * *

An exceptionally early start brought us into Kabul at eight o'clock, and we had hopes of being able to leave on the same day, without demanding too much of our friends at the British Embassy, who, be it said to their eternal credit, never gave any sign of the fact if they were not particularly glad to see us back, and gave us every possible assistance. On arrival, we set about ensuring our speedy departure with energy. Christopher took the car to the garage for a lightning spring change, Richard set about packing films for being air-mailed to England for processing, and John and I went into the town to try to arrange the necessary formalities for our exit.

It was we who had the least success. Calls on the Rector and the Press Minister were duly completed and our shopping went off well; the Persian Consul, after an initial reluctance to give us visas because of the lack of a letter of recommendation from the Embassy, readily agreed to issue them when he heard that we were from Cambridge, where he himself had been educated. Armed with permission to enter another country, we approached the police and the Foreign Office where, in violent contrast to our treatment when we first arrived in Kabul, permits—this time to leave Afghanistan—were given to us with almost indecent haste: the whole process took rather less than a minute in each office.

So far so good, we thought, as we took our applications for

petrol coupons to the office where we had collected our allowance for Badakhshan.

"The office has moved," we were told. "This now belongs to the Ministry of the Interior. I do not know where you get petrol now." After numerous inquiries, we found that the petrol office was now in a street some ten minutes' walk away. We went there, only to find that the men in the office had put away their papers and were busy eating *polau* with loud sucking noises from plates. Politely they asked us to join them. We refused, as we had been invited to luncheon at the Embassy, but we asked for water: this was immediately brought by a grubby little boy of about eight who normally was a messenger but who, during lunch-hours, was a *saqao*—a water-bearer—carrying his wares in a clay pot and offering them from one communal glass.

"Nice of you to join us," remarked one of the men between horrible squelching noises.

"Very," agreed another, and the meal progressed in silence. We sipped our water.

Finally, we broached the subject of petrol.

"Oh, we can't do anything about that yet," they said. "The man who can fix it for you will not be back until five." They offered us grapes, which we refused, and started to eat them unconcernedly themselves.

"You staying here until then? It's cool indoors, isn't it?"

So we went back to the Embassy.

Christopher had some news for us from the garage. He said: "The gearbox will fall out if we go on without getting the mounting mended. We cannot leave before tomorrow morning."

It was then that we found out the true meaning of the word diplomatic. The Embassy already knew about our difficulties and had arranged, not only a place for us to sleep that night, but also an invitation to dinner, to breakfast the next morning and to luncheon the next day, so that we were virtually com-



Cars in the water : lorries in the Kabul river

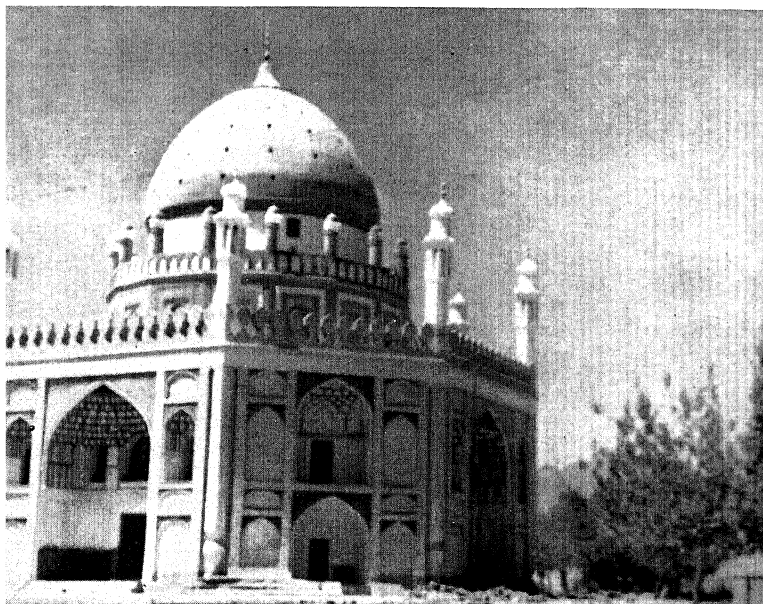
Cars in the water : ourselves in the Kokcha;
only two are doing anything about extricating the car,
as the other two had to take photographs





Qandahar : The Burj-i-Dada

Qandahar : The tomb of Ahmad Shah



pelled to set aside any feelings that we ought to refuse, and accepted willingly.

That evening we returned to the attack in Kabul, only to find that a fresh difficulty awaited us. The head of the Petrol Department only spoke Pashto, and everything had to be translated for him from our weak Persian. A compromise was found, however, when we discovered that the man who could actually authorize the issue of petrol—a man far higher than the Head of the Department—could speak German, so once more an application was written out in that language. In a surprisingly short time, it came back countersigned, but yet another difficulty arose.

"The new lot of coupons have not yet come from the printers," we were told.

So we returned to the British Embassy, to a delightful cocktail party given by the Military Attaché, and went to bed with our heads slightly reeling as a result of drinking after prolonged abstinence from alcohol.

In the morning another and this time successful attack took place, so that by lunch-time we had been issued with enough newly printed coupons to see us out of Afghanistan. For the last time we walked along the embankment and listened to the noises of the town—the tinkling of the *droshki*-bells, the shouts of the vendors, the hubbub of the crowds, interspersed frequently by the braying of donkeys. The blue Zis water-lorry ground majestically by to the accompanying squeals of the people who were taking a free shower-bath. Children splashed happily in the syrupy green of the river. We hailed a *droshki* and made our leisurely way back to the Upper Garden.

The First Secretary, now Chargé d'Affaires in the temporary absence of the Ambassador on leave, gave us a delicious luncheon in the Big House, sitting on a veranda which overlooked the town. Afterwards, we were pleased to find that the Brute was now in perfect running order for the road, and seemingly dying to make the return journey to England.

Unable even to send flowers to our hosts—for there were no flower-shops in Kabul—we could only thank them for what they had done for us. Without their help, life would have been very difficult for us indeed, and it was with regret that we headed through the outskirts of the town, past the pretentious and quite disproportionately large Kabul radio station, and on to the road to Qandahar, a journey which, we reflected, had in 1880 taken twenty-three days, when General Roberts's famous march to the relief of the town and the defeat of Ayub Khan took place.

The road, on its way through this part of Afghanistan, which is so closely associated with the history of British India, led through a stony, empty, mountainous desert, pinkish in colour and almost totally devoid of water. That at some times of the year water was present was demonstrated by the numerous wadis which we had to cross: the floods had at some time demolished the bridges which led over them, so that the driver had to keep wide awake in order to avoid following in the footsteps of Gul Mohammed's lorry-driver. The broken bridges were never marked in any way, and as the surface was good enough to allow high speeds, it became a common experience to feel the brakes being jammed on as the car lurched off the road in order to drive into the wadi itself. We counted over twenty bridges damaged in this way over the three hundred and fifty miles of the journey.

The most important town along the route is Ghazni, a place of great historical importance. A little way outside the present town, there stand two great towers which overlook many acres of ruins. They stand, majestic, aloof, like two sentinels, but sentinels whose dignity is, alas, impaired by a sort of Chinese hat of galvanized steel placed over the top of each by a provident but tasteless authority in order to preserve them from the weather's ravages. These "Towers of Victory" are almost all that remains of a city which in the eleventh century was a centre of learning and the capital of the empire of Sultan Mahmud.

Mahmud of Ghazni was the third of a line of rulers founded in the tenth century by a runaway Turkish slave, and which had by the time of his succession acquired domination over much of modern Afghanistan and a part of eastern Persia. It was Mahmud who, after consolidating his rule as far north as the Oxus, turned to the rich plains of India, whose riches he dedicated to the building and the beautifying of his capital, which was soon second to none in art and science. Unfortunately, the empire of Mahmud did not last, as the Emperor had based it upon himself: like any other dictatorship, it could not survive its dictator by very long. Repeated attacks by the Turks from the north weakened its power, and only a century later, in 1140, the Ghorid ruler Ala-ed-Din, nicknamed the Earth Burner, captured the city and razed it to the ground, leaving only the two towers intact.

The modern town is situated next to the site of the old, having been gradually built up after the Earth Burner's sack. We found that the entry into it was blocked by a military parade, which was being held as part of the *jashm* (Afghan Independence Day) celebrations which were taking place at the time. At the side of the road, several companies of infantry were waiting for the command to march, and already the cavalry were advancing past a military band which was being led by an officer with a trombone in one hand and using the other to beat time against his thigh. He looked very like a prominent dance-band conductor. The members of the band themselves had an air of concentration on their faces as each one played his own particular tune, one related neither in beat nor in style to that of his neighbour; only the irregular thumps of the big drum corresponded even vaguely with the ecstatic slaps that their leader was giving to his thigh between occasional joyous bursts on the trombone.

The officer in charge of falling the companies in for the parade was very polite. One company had already set out and was beyond recall, but we were to be delayed no longer. He waved us on in the rear of that company and as soon as we

had moved he fell in another company behind us. Slowly, sedately, to the many rhythms of the band, the parade filed past the officer taking it: the cavalry in the van, a company of infantry, the mechanized element—ourselves—followed by more infantry in the rear. Once past the officer, and with the ironic cheers of the crowd still ringing in our ears, we accelerated past the infantry; the cavalry, unused to cars, bolted, and we were treated to a display of magnificent horsemanship as the men who had got their horses under control urged us, with huge grins, to chase the others to Qandahar.

No sooner had we stopped in order to allow the cavalry to regroup than Christopher found himself in conversation with an Air Force officer who could speak English. Christopher, feeling that he might want a lift, had asked him: "Are you going to Qandahar, Sir?" in Cavalry Club accents which set us all laughing: it brought to mind the vision of a raw subaltern who might have asked in the same unbelieving tones just the same question of General Roberts seventy years earlier. The officer, as it happened, was going to Qandahar, but he was going on a lorry and did not wish to overload our car. However, he had plenty of time and had something to say to us before we left.

"Over these mountains," he said, pointing eastwards, "is Pakistan." He spat. "*Pashtunistan*, lying under the yoke of an alien oppressor. . . ." and he launched into the customary tirade that we had heard so often. He drew close to us, to make his points more clearly. His breath was foetid, heavy with the smell of dysentery, a smell like carrion. He gave a fiendish laugh, a bark like that of a hyena, showering saliva on to his listeners.

"But they had better look out: we will destroy ALL," he concluded.

(When we had been in Kabul, we had regularly heard, at half-past six on Tuesday and Friday mornings, an uneven, high-pitched drone of aeroplane motors. In the sky, a few hundred feet above us, were five biplanes, of English manu-

facture and some twenty years old. Like five flies in an uneven V-formation, they had buzzed ineffectively across our field of vision and landed at the airport whose name in translation means "Mr Rhubarb". "What are those aircraft?" we had asked. "The Afghan Air Force," we were told. "And the other flights?" we had gone on. "You misunderstand me," had been the answer. "What you see up there *is* the Afghan Air Force.")

Morale in the Afghan Air Force was nothing if not high, notwithstanding the modern jet aircraft that existed in Pakistan.

Sightseeing in Ghazni was curtailed by the presence of a sizeable escort of policemen and soldiers who crowded around us shouting "*Memnu*" whenever we tried to take photographs. We did, however, manage to climb up inside one of Mahmud's Towers of Victory and from a point of vantage immediately beneath its ridiculous conical tin hat were able to survey the acres of destruction left in the wake of *Jehan-Suz*, the Earth Burner of nearly a thousand years ago. We also took the opportunity of buying a number of *pustins*, or waistcoats made of sheeps' pelts with the fur turned inwards and embroidered designs on the leather. These *pustins* were almost the only example we found of Pathan local work in the bazaars. In the north, we had found the same dearth of articles which, in a country more frequented by foreigners, would quickly have been prostituted as souvenirs for tourists. The Tajiks had specialized in *chamus*, or ankle-boots with pointed toes, and *panjabi*, shoes which were similar; both of these were decorated with embroidery of coloured wool and silver wire. They had also produced the skull-caps which fitted underneath the *lungi* and which were to be found everywhere in Afghanistan. The Pathans, in whose part of the country we now were, specialized in waistcoats—both of pelts and of velvet. The latter were far more elaborate, with gold embroidery crisscrossing the front and with tassels and other ornamentation hanging from them. Fur

pustins were normally worn in the winter where in summer an ordinary European waistcoat would have done; the velvet *pustins* were kept for special occasions, such as the dances which took place each year.

It was remarkable how little we felt the difference between principally Tajik towns and the Pathan towns. Apart from some difficulty over making ourselves understood in Pashto, the people seemed little different from those of Badakhshan: there were the same sort of clothes, similar bazaars, exactly the same friendliness to us and the same independence of attitude and mien. Only the stolidity of the Northerners seemed to be lacking, and to have been replaced by a vigour, an underlying fire, which made one feel that these people were to the Tajiks much as the Irish are to the English.

As the countryside flattened out on the way to Qandahar, the camel began to replace the donkey as the principal beast of burden. Already we had passed numerous herds of these animals grazing by the side of the road. They had run ahead of the car with their strange, antediluvian, lolloping gait before turning off and looking round at us with their stupid, contemptuous and yet aristocratic expressions. Numerous caravans were on the road, the beasts tied head to tail in a long string, with the biggest in the lead and the babies bringing up the rear: the youngest of the babies, with their shaggy coats and innocent eyes, were allowed off the string, being trusted to follow their mothers, and they gambolled along happily with the caravan.

Night found us still many miles from Qandahar, and we were compelled to camp in a dry wadi some way from the nearest water. The river we had been following had dried up, so we had to wash in a stagnant pool of stinking slime which resounded to the croak of many frogs and the hum of innumerable mosquitoes. It was another bad night which almost saw us walking back to London. Our stove had been working badly since it had first started to give trouble in the Hindu Kush, but a repair effected at the Embassy had given us

grounds to hope that it would continue working until we were home. It was a vain hope. With an eerie *Who-o-o-o-sh* the pressure tank, with the pressure inside it built up by much pumping, forced out the pump and sent a jet of burning petrol six feet into the air and into a dry thorn-bush, which was soon blazing as merrily as any bush Moses could have seen on Sinai. Next to the bush was a can with five more gallons of petrol in it, and next to the can of petrol was the car, with a further eight containers, each holding yet another five gallons of petrol. Only the quick—and rather brave—action of Christopher in jumping into it and driving it away saved us from the barren comfort of being able to contemplate a claim on the insurance for the full value of the Brute. From then on until Teheran, we had to cook on “Benghazis”, a kind of stove used by the Army in the Western Desert, which consists of an empty tin filled with petrol-soaked sand.

Our first glimpse of Qandahar the next morning was the airport, scheduled by some optimists to displace Karachi as the major international cross-roads for airlines to and from the East. When we saw it—and there is no reason to believe that it is any different now—Qandahar airport still had a long way to go before it could contemplate taking this role upon itself. If it had not been for the sign reading *Aéroport International de Kandahar* we might well have missed it altogether, for all that was to be seen was a small white house standing in the middle of a flat space. On getting closer, we saw a wind-sock flying over it and one or two Dakotas standing by. Even though the site is obviously a good one, amenities leave something to be desired, even by the standards of an airport such as, for instance, Damascus, which are none too high.

We did not intend to leave Qandahar until the evening, making one long five-hundred-mile dash to Herat in order to try to avoid the heat of the desert during the day, for this was where our friends on their way to the Himalayas had had such a bad time. So we made for the hotel, along the pleasant tree-lined streets of the town, finding it to be far

more modern and clean than any of the others we had seen. We took rooms for the day—a perfectly common occurrence in Afghanistan and one which caused no surprise whatever—and after washing came out into the entrance hall, where we were delighted to meet a young man of about twenty, as well educated as he was obviously well-to-do—his gold watch and good clothes told this—who spoke excellent English and introduced himself as Abdul 'Aziz.

It was a Friday, and Abdul 'Aziz, with the hospitality typical of his country, put himself entirely at our disposal as a guide to the city. In the time remaining before luncheon, he took us round the covered bazaars and the main streets. We changed some money in a merchant's office high above a yard packed with goods from many parts of the world: there were crates of Japanese textiles, Indian tea, British machinery and assorted Russian hardware, all waiting to be transported to their destinations. Many of the merchants were Sikhs from India. Qandahar was obviously a very prosperous town, in size second only to Kabul, but in wealth probably exceeding it. The streets were more level, the houses on the whole in better condition and the people appeared happier. Everywhere there were baskets of fruit for sale on the pavement, adding splashes of colour to the streets: the grapes were the sweetest we had come across and the inhabitants were usually to be seen with a bunch in their hands as they walked along. The Provençal atmosphere was very strong under the brilliant blue sky.

Unfortunately, we found that the citizens of Qandahar did not live up to the standards of honesty prevailing in other parts of the country. So high had we found these to be elsewhere that we had grown into the habit of leaving the car unlocked, and up to now we had had no unfortunate experiences. This time, however, we returned to the car to find one of our cameras missing. Thinking that we had left it at the hotel, we were not unduly concerned, and returned to look for it. When we did not find it there, we asked the hotel manager if he had seen anyone near the car and asked if it

would be any use going to the police. To our surprise, this worried him very much.

"Please," he said, "do not go to the police. I do not know where your camera was stolen, but it is no use telling that to *them*. They will say I stole it and take me away to the police station where I shall be beaten. Then they will come back and say that I will not tell where the camera is and ask if you want me to be put in gaol, or they may put me there anyway. So I will suffer and you will not get your camera back. The police take offences against foreigners very seriously."

Whether he had taken it or not, we would not get our property back: not that the camera itself mattered, but it had about seventeen colour photographs of Ghazni in it. The matter had to be dropped.

In the afternoon, Abdul 'Aziz took us to the old city, which I had been asked to photograph for a friend at Cambridge, and which we were in any case anxious to see.

In the early eighteenth century, a Pashto-speaking tribe, believed to be of Turkish descent and called the Ghilzais, lived around Qandahar, and had availed themselves of the weakness of their Persian overlord, Shah Sultan Hussain, to attain virtual independence. In fact, under their leader Mahmud, they were able to overcome a vastly more numerous Persian army, lay siege to and capture Isfahan, and establish their leader as Shah of Persia. However, the power of the Ghilzais was eventually broken by the efforts of one of the most brilliant generals of all time, Nadir Shah, who, after rallying the Persian people against their brutal and uncouth oppressors, defeated them in a succession of battles and drove the scanty remnants back to the district of Qandahar. Late in 1736 he moved against their principal stronghold, the city itself, which he captured after a siege lasting just over a year; this was the old city which we were now seeing. Whilst the siege was in progress, he made his men build a new town, which he named Nadirabad, on the site of which stands the present city of Qandahar, some two miles to the east of the old town.

When Qandahar fell, Nadir compelled all the inhabitants to move to Nadirabad and then attempted to raze the old fortress to the ground; so strong were the walls, however, that he had to leave the task unfinished, so that traces of them are clearly visible beside the ruins of the fortress proper. Still standing high above, and dominating the Qaitol ridge, which used to protect the old city against attacks from the west, is the Burji-Dada, the Tower of Dada, whose thick walls are said once to have been used, not only as a defence against enemies, but as a protection for the virgin Dada, daughter of the Ghilzai leader Mir Wais, who was kept imprisoned there by a Victorian-minded father against the dangerous charms of the warrior princes.

Having shown us the old city, Abdul 'Aziz then took us to see the tomb of Ahmad Shad Durrani, the Pearl of Pearls. Ahmad Shah is rightly looked upon as the founder of modern Afghanistan, for it was he who, in the second half of the eighteenth century, carved out of the decaying Persian and Mogul empires an empire of his own, based upon Qandahar, which stretched from the Indus to the Oxus, including Badakhshan, Herat and the suzerainty over much of eastern Persia, virtually the whole of the Hindu Kush, and even at one time Delhi itself. The tomb is a very fine memorial to a great man; inside, it is a very satisfactory blending of both Persian and Indian influences. Lying under glass in a case at one end of the mosque is a sword and helmet, of Arabic origin and of great age: these are said to have belonged to a son-in-law of the Prophet and to have been worn by Ahmad Shah when he went to war. In another case, hidden from view and only seen by a very few, is a coat, said to have belonged to the Prophet himself.

Abdul 'Aziz then took us back to the hotel, stopping on the way at his house to fetch us a history book of Qandahar written in Pashto. It was illustrated—rather badly—but he derived great amusement from showing us pictures of Nadir Shah, Mir Wais, Ahmad Shah and various other historical

figures who had featured in Qandahar's past. His greatest delight came when he found a picture of Sir William Macnaghten, an envoy of the Government of India who was murdered by the Afghans in 1840 at the conclusion of the First Afghan War.

"Here is your Macnaghten," he chortled delightedly. "Your Macnaghten, see?" he squealed, drawing his finger across his throat bloodthirstily.

Soon, however, he was sober again as he told us of his own personal difficulties.

"We own quite a lot of land around here and elsewhere," he told us, "on which we grow cotton, so that I am quite rich." He brought out the word without the slightest tinge of embarrassment. "It all belongs to my father and will in time belong to me."

We asked him what he did, telling him that we were from Cambridge.

"Oh! Cambridge—how I should love to go there. I was a student too, but now I live on the estate. I have never been out of Afghanistan, except once, to Karachi—that was before the troubles, you understand."

I said: "But if you are as rich as all that you can surely pay for a course at Cambridge or elsewhere, can't you?"

Abdul 'Aziz laughed a little bitterly. "No, I cannot. I cannot go to a university anywhere except in Afghanistan."

"Because of currency trouble?"

"Oh no—far from it. My father has plenty of money in the United States and Switzerland from selling cotton and other things abroad. They will not give me a passport. It is as simple as that."

"Why on earth not?"

"Because they are afraid that I will not come back. They do the same with ministers who have been abroad: once back here they do not go abroad again. It is hard on us, but I suppose necessary. We are badly needed here—I mean students and ministers, of course."

He had evidently been devoting some thought to this, because he eventually asked us if we would smuggle him out of his own country into Iran or Pakistan. Our refusal to do this, based as it was upon the fact that neither of the countries concerned would be likely to offer him political asylum and that a person so naïve would be bound to be unable to look after himself, was an obvious disappointment to him; but, in spite of the applause given in certain sections of the Press to another Cambridge party which helped a man out of Poland at about the same time, we felt that our decision was the right one.

Our friend had a further surprise for us. He announced grandly that we had been invited to dinner with the director of Morrison-Knudsen, the American contractors who are at present building the dams on the Helmand and Arghandab rivers, which will in course of time, it is hoped, provide irrigation for sizeable patches of desert land. This took us somewhat aback, as in Kabul they had advised us not to approach Morrison-Knudsen: apparently the firm did not look with a kindly eye upon calls from every English-speaking person passing through Qandahar. However, Abdul 'Aziz seemed so sure of himself that we tidied ourselves and set out towards their compound.

It proved to be an impressive site: walled in by ten-foot-high floodlit barbed wire was a little industrial America. The guard allowed us in after a long talk with Abdul 'Aziz and we drove past the hangars with their rows of huge bulldozers and other earth-moving equipment, past the vast stores of ancillaries and into a trim little suburb. On one side of this exported Main Street were one or two stores and an open-air cinema showing a fairly recent film to an audience of about a hundred; on the other, a row of trimly-curtained windows concealed a securely American small-town life continuing within.

When Christopher rang at the Director's door, Abdul 'Aziz seemed to be smitten with a quite inexplicable reticence and

refused to say anything at all, leaving Christopher to do the talking. The Director lost no time in telling him that we were not invited to dinner, that he had no idea who we were, and that he had no idea at all who Abdul 'Aziz was. That being the case, he concluded, with less tact than impatience, would we please leave the compound at once? We should not starve in Qandahar, he added kindly.

Hot-faced, we started to comply. Abdul 'Aziz explained that it was not actually the Director himself who was a friend of his, nor even his deputy, nor even—he finally admitted—an American, but the cook, an Afghan who had once worked for him, and who would be delighted to see him at any time. Realizing that things were about as embarrassing for him as they were for us, we refrained from hard words as we set out back towards the town, trying to see things from the Director's point of view: it was, after all, not his job to entertain every English traveller who passed through Qandahar, particularly such unprepossessing ones as we must have appeared to be. Morrison-Knudsen were a business concern, and neither a philanthropic organization nor an embassy of their country.

The work which this company are doing in Afghanistan has been going on for ten years, and is intimately connected with the internal politics of Afghanistan. We had already heard that the Government had plans for disposing of the nomads as a politically imponderable factor by settling them on the land, and this project was an integral part of these plans. One dam had been built over the Arghandab river near Ghirishk, some eighty miles away, and this one was over the Helmand or Hirmand river: the idea was to prevent the waters from flowing over the "Desert of Death" (Dasht-i-Margo) and into the Hamun-i-Seistan, a lake on the Persian border, and to use them elsewhere. The Americans, paid partly with Afghan Government money and partly with funds from Point Four, were in addition building hydro-electric plants to work off the dams. The arrangement had

three drawbacks. Firstly, we had heard ugly rumours—whether true or not we never found out—that the soil had not been sufficiently well studied before work began, and that the newly irrigated land was unlikely to be very fertile: this, if true, was a reflection, not on the magnificent work of the American engineers, but on the overall planning. Secondly, the Persian Government had objected to the Afghan use of the water: owing to the decrease of water in the Hamun-i-Seistan, the Persians had been forced to carry out a large-scale evacuation of its own farmers living on the Persian banks of the lake. Thirdly, the nomads would resist strongly any attempt at settling them. This was the gravest objection of all: for the nomads concerned in this area would almost certainly be the Ghilzais, sadly fallen in status in the two centuries that had elapsed since the time of their greatness under Mir Wais, but nevertheless still a very powerful tribe which would cause much trouble to a Government trying to interfere with their way of life. From what we had seen of the Ghilzais and other *kochis*, it seemed probable that, if they were to be united in a common cause, considerable force would be needed for their suppression.

It was by now late, and we returned to the hotel to pay the bill. Experience had taught us that to dine there would take several hours, so we asked Abdul 'Aziz to take us to a place in the town. When the hotel bill did arrive, it was a surprise, being for some two hundred *afghanis* and about twice as much as we expected. The keeper was summoned.

"Why is this bill so monstrously high?" we asked.

"It is not high. It is low. It is the lowest bill I have ever given. I make it cheap because you did not tell the police about your camera."

"It is outrageous. In Kabul we would have paid half that." This was not strictly the truth.

"Ah, but this is not Kabul. This is Qandahar, and my hotel is far better than the one at Kabul," he countered.

"On the contrary, your hotel is far worse than the one at Kabul."

"Far better," he said, beginning to get angry.

"It is worse than the hotel at Kabul, worse than the one at Faisabad; it is the worst hotel in Afghanistan. Two hundred *afghanis* is far too much. I will pay a hundred and twenty."

The hotel keeper now put on a fine semblance of fury. "Very well," he said, "if my hotel is so bad, I will not have you pay one *afghani* for staying here. I will not have you think Afghans are cheats. Instead, I will *pay* you for staying here. I will *pay* you two hundred *afghanis*."

We had lost, as usual. Wearily, knowing that we could not go on haggling, we paid the bill in full, and went to Abdul 'Aziz's place. It proved to be a stinking little room with benches and tables, very flyblown, and with garish pictures of Mecca and other holy places on the walls. After we had been taken into the kitchen to choose from a series of doubtful-looking pots on a stove, I noticed on the wall a curious oblong whose dull metallic sheen seemed to come from thousands of beads clustered closely together. Closer inspection revealed that this was a mirror, whose surface was completely concealed by a multitude of flies so close together that they looked like beads.

Abdul 'Aziz had been a slightly pathetic figure, and we were quite sorry to say good-bye to him. He had, after all, done his best to help us and to make us enjoy our stay in his town, and in spite of everything we were grateful to him, in particular for much information which it would otherwise have been hard to obtain. It was a pity that we could not help him to get an education in England, but it was not worth the risk of his eventually finding himself an unhappy exile abroad, unable to return to his own country. One might deplore the need for the Government to restrict the number of students sent abroad to a limited number whom it could trust to return, but it would have been foolish to imagine that the need did not exist. Afghanistan, as a country still in an early

stage of development along contemporary Western lines, cannot afford to run the risk of losing its capital. In this way the prevention of the loss of young men of intelligence becomes as reasonable as the restrictions on the export of financial capital imposed in our own country. A liberally minded Government will relax the restrictions as soon as it can, but it will be careful not to do so prematurely. Abdul 'Aziz was but one of the victims of his country's pains of modernization.

Nor could one feel unduly worried at the tale we had been told of police methods. The English Press frequently hints broadly at similar methods, said to be in use by the police in France, the United States and other Western countries: and it is quite possible that our own police, constitutionally probably the best controlled in the world, are not entirely free from blame in this respect. Again, the need for the police to have a strong hand in Afghanistan is obvious, and democracy must be looked upon as the luxury of rich countries. Some abuse of rule by the police is, unfortunately, inevitable. Since Afghanistan is still a country with a tremendous gap—not only in wealth but, more important, in education—between the few and the many, the fate of the country must lie in the hands of the few, and the voice of the masses has to be kept in abeyance until, under the wise guidance of their leaders, they shall have acquired sufficient judgement for their decisions to be moderate. Afghanistan is at present ruled by an oligarchy mainly drawn from the Royal Family, and any semblance of a constitutional monarchy is a thin veneer: the deciding vote in the Parliament comes from delegates who are appointed by the King. The time of danger has not come yet: it will come when the people of Afghanistan have acquired a superficial education but no mature judgement, and are easily swayed by the oratory of those little better than themselves. For that reason, it is fortunate that the Afghan rulers are doing their best to prevent their country from being hurried into a democracy for which it is as yet far from ready, and therefore the foreigner with a poli-

tical sermon to preach is unlikely to be welcome in Afghanistan for some time. The Government obviously intends to do things its own way, making haste slowly and under careful control. The history of the country has shown on many bloody pages the chaos which arises from too weak a control of the strongly individualistic and independent masses of several different races which make up Afghanistan.

* * * *

We started off on our long drive through the night to Herat late in the evening. Passably good and much improved road conditions brought our speed up to levels undreamed of for many weeks. Within a few minutes of leaving Qandahar we heard a loud clank, followed by an increase in noise from the exhaust: our exhaust pipe had rusted through and the silencer had to be taken off. The trip continued to the accompaniment of a noise like an aero-engine, through occasional ghostly villages which loomed up in the dust, where when we stopped for fuel men could be heard cursing us from their beds on the side of the road. "Thou father of a dog," they said, "may all thy children be eunuchs." Then, seeing that we were foreign, they would come over to the car. "I am sorry for my words," they would say. "My tongue was carried away. You are our guests and are welcome to our village."

On we went westwards. Soon the grim bastions of the Ghirishk were looming up above us, grey and sinister in the moonlight . . . the fortress at Dilarem, just discernible in the dark . . . then, in the first light of dawn, the tremendously long, low crenellations of Farah lay before us, pinkly glowing. We splashed through the Farah river, the water rearing up in tinkling transparent wings to either side of the car . . . and stopped by a ruined caravanserai for breakfast before it got too hot.

The caravanserai was typical of the many that we had seen, both here and in Persia. They normally consist of a sort of walled court, often with towers at the corners, around which

are built a number of rooms which open on to the inside and whose roofs come up to a level well below the top of the walls. There is one great gate opening into the courtyard. Into these caravanserais used to come the caravans which made their way across Asia in past centuries. The beasts were stabled at one side of the yard and the men in the various rooms, which had ledges around them for sleeping on and a hole in the roof to make an escape for the smoke of fires laid in the middle of the earth floor. Inside the caravanserais, the valuable convoys would be safe from the banditry that used to be all too prevalent in Central Asia. Nowadays, these forerunners of the American motel are but little used, and the walls and fortifications have fallen into decay, the haunts of snakes, spiders and lizards, and rarely the refuge of men.

It grew much hotter as the day drew on. We felt like a tiny dot in the middle of infinity as we crawled across seemingly endless vistas of desolate brown desert and blackened spiky mountains which stretched interminably into the distance. Above the ground lay a thick shimmering pelt which, when seen from above, made the land look as though it lay under water. Of real water there was none.

We finally entered Herat along a broad and deserted avenue lined with poplar trees, and made our way back to the Park Hotel. The manager remembered us and, doubtless having been informed of our impending arrival by one of the road-menders we had seen climbing up a telegraph pole with a portable telephone under his arm, he had reserved rooms for us. We were glad to meet a friend there, a photographer from an American magazine, whom we had met in Kabul. In the short time we had last seen him he had "done" the whole country, and now was on his way to Kabul to photograph the *jashm* celebrations before returning to the United States.

He would be a little late in getting to Kabul, but it was through no fault of his own. Accustomed to the high standards of airline service prevalent in his own country, he had booked a seat on the Afghan aeroplane which flies weekly

from Herat to Qandahar and on to Kabul. Trustingly, he and a number of other men, including two Russian wool-buyers from Tashkent, had repaired to the airstrip. There they had waited. When they had tired of waiting, they had prevailed upon someone to telephone from Herat to Qandahar, in order to find out what had happened to the Dakota which was now half a day overdue. In due course they had been told, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, that the Dakota had arrived in Qandahar, but that on arrival it had been chartered by a number of pilgrims who had been seized with the urge to visit Mecca, and that the airline service would therefore be suspended until the aeroplane returned from Saudi Arabia. They hoped that the passengers had not been unduly put out. There were always lorries going from Herat to Kabul, they had added.

The American was planning to take the mail bus which was fortunately, *insh'Allah*, to leave that night. The two Russians sat in the lounge of the hotel, not talking to anyone else, the cooing flow of their speech continuing softly as they waited patiently for the time, perhaps many weeks away, when they should have an aeroplane. They did not seem worried. Perhaps, we reflected, expense accounts were a thing which existed in Russia too.

We left Herat at midday on the next day. The petrol storage tanks still glinted in the sun by the peeling tangerine of the tomb of Shah Rukh and the four lonely pillars of the Musallah: the combine harvesters, unmoved since we had last seen them, still looked like a cartoon out of *Krokodil*. Back across the pointed arch of the bridge over the Heri river, back across the emptiness that surrounds Islam Qal'a. . . . "Ah, so you're back?" asked the Customs official politely, as if we had been guests in his house who had gone out for an hour to tea. "And what do you think of it all?"

What did we think of it all? A host of memories came crowding back. We thought of the American refrigerators, still weathering outside the shed even now after two months;

of the German-speaking lorry-driver; of the Kabul hospital; of the bazaar; of 'Ata Mohammed, and the simple curiosity of the villagers at Boharak with whom he made such a contrast. We thought of the other Mohammed, of Gul Mohammed and of Buz-Kashi; we thought of empty deserts, towering mountains and rushing rivers; we thought of Abdul 'Aziz. It seemed more like two years than two months since we had been here. Thoughts of the unfailing kindness of the people we had met everywhere in the country came to mind, the kindness we had received in such generous measure during the two years—months—that we had been there.

"*Afghanistan keshvar-i-khubi ast*," we told him. "*Bessiar dust darim*." ("Afghanistan was a good country; we liked it very much.") A trite remark perhaps, but what else could one say?

He was in any case pleased by this. Extracting our passports from us as a conjurer pulls a rabbit out of a hat, he bade us wait in the *mehman-khaneh*, where we stayed until it was nearly sundown. When all had been completed, he waved us out of his compound and on to the road to Persia.

We drove on, leaving the purply-brown mountains behind us, across the plain until we came to the hut which marked the frontier. This time, no barrier stretched across the road, for the pole had been knocked on to the ground and no one had picked it up. Three or four gazelles shot across our path like bullets. The trail of dust kicked up by them hung, motionless, in mid-air. Against the pink disk of the setting sun, which threw into sharp relief a number of thorn-bushes on the horizon, the lonely and diminutive figure of a soldier could be seen waving to us. He was wearing the uniform of the Imperial Iranian Army.

Chapter Nine

RETURN TO ENGLAND

IN Yusufabad, the soldier unbarred the door to the Customs yard almost as soon as we knocked upon it; he closed it again with great and obvious care not to make a noise. We drove to a corner and stopped. Nothing happened. We got out, slamming the doors. One or two faces looked up in irritation, but nothing further happened. We got back in and turned on the wireless. A dance band was broadcasting from Ceylon. Immediately a face appeared at the window, motioning angrily to us to turn it off. We complied, and the face disappeared. We turned it on again. This time, the face seemed really angry as its owner opened the door.

"Quiet," it whispered furiously.

"Where are the Customs?" we whispered back.

As though it would do *anything* to get rid of us, the face immediately sent for the official concerned. The formalities were completed as quickly as they were mysteriously silent, a little leaden seal was affixed to the car, and we were hustled out of the yard; faces looked up again in pain as we started the engine.

All the way across the hundred-odd miles of country which separated us from Meshed we saw evidence of much unusual activity. The villages through which we drove were as silent as graveyards, and not a soul was to be seen on any of the streets, yet outside there were often large crowds, dressed, not in the tribal clothes which we had noticed on the way out, but in a uniform black, topped with a black cap. The occasional women were wearing veils as long as Afghan *chadris* and black. Black banners with ornate Arabic writing upon them were to be seen waving above the crowds as they marched across the fields singing strange dirges. A telegraph

office in a town called Turbat-i-Sheikh Jam had to be opened specially for us so that we could inform Raj at the Consulate of our impending return. The operator told us that the whole country was in mourning for Hussein, the Third Imam, who was killed at the battle of Karbala and whose body was chopped up by his enemies. He advised us to be very careful in Meshed, for Shia Muslims had come there from many parts of the world, and some were decided fanatics.

It was just outside Turbat-i-Sheikh Jam that we were surprised to see, in the middle of one of these sinister black crowds, a sight to which we had long been unaccustomed: a bicycle. We drew up, and saw it to be of Continental manufacture, to belong to an obvious European, and to have a very flat tyre. The crowd parted as we got out of the car and walked up to the owner of this machine, and then it returned to its incantations. We were left alone with a man of about twenty-five, whose fair hair and blue eyes betrayed the Northerner lying beneath a deeply sunburned complexion. He proved to be a Belgian from Liège, who had thrown up a job as a waiter and was simply bicycling to India "for a change". He had never really settled down in Belgium, he said. This was hardly surprising. As he explained,

"Ma mère était une Italienne; mon père était français. Et voilà," he continued, as if this were the inevitable result of his parentage, *"je suis belge."*

He had bicycled from Liège in fifty-five days, leap-frogging along the way with a sixty-five-year-old Englishman called Stan Smith, who was at present in the lead: we had heard of him in Herat the evening before. "*Le Smeet*", as our Belgian friend called him, had come from England and was on his way to Australia. Perhaps in view of the greater distance which he had to cover, and perhaps also because of his age, Smith had allowed himself the luxury of an occasional lift in a lorry. The Belgian—whose name we never found out—had pedalled the whole way, and as a result his tyres were worn to the thinness of paper, in places having patches of leather sewn on

to them. He had some scathing remarks to make about "*ces salauds de la compagnie ******", who had failed to have a new set of tyres sent to him in Teheran and who were responsible for his plight. We mended the tyre for him as best we could with our own as yet unused vulcanizing equipment. His attitude was markedly different from ours, for he was plainly taking things as they came, had no schedule to keep to and no responsibility for failure or success in his venture, and could do as he pleased. We were a little envious of him as we saw him disappear over a rise.

On our arrival in Meshed we were immediately virtually imprisoned in the Consulate. "You had *really* better not go out today," we were told, "it is the day when they get particularly worked up." This was a pity, for our impressions of Persia after Afghanistan were different from those we had had on entering from Turkey. We felt that we had arrived in a modern city, one with cars, asphalted streets and electric lighting, and that we were being unjustly deprived of our right to celebrate. However, we contented ourselves with watching the crowds from the roof of the gatehouse. This in itself was enough to convince us of the wisdom of remaining behind the walls. The air was full of the rhythmic wailing of crowds assembled in Meshed from many parts of the Muslim world, as they passed beneath us in torchlit black-clad processions, crazed by the excitement, the chanting and their grief, which was stimulated by the incantations of the mullahs amongst them. As they chanted, they threw their hands above their heads in unison, marching and counter-marching beneath the place from which we watched. Some of the men were flagellants, naked from the waist up, beating themselves and one another with whips and sticks, slashing themselves with knives until their bodies dripped with blood. Through the night the wailing and processions continued, centring on the distant tomb of the Eighth Imam in the middle of the town. The mourning permeated the whole of Meshed, filling every corner with its pulsating throb, a sinister

cacophony of sounds, infinitely frightening. At dawn it ceased suddenly.

* * * *

Nothing whatsoever happened between Meshed and Teheran. The trip took a day and a half, a time unrelieved by any but the most routine of incident across country unrelieved by anything except the occasional town and the picturesque ruins of Damghan and Bustan. Otherwise the trip was straightforward driving at steady speeds along the corrugated roads which seemed glassy-smooth after what we had been used to. Once more we stopped by a river for a bathe before putting on our suits; once more we observed the haze which surrounds Teheran; and once more the town leaped upon us from the desert.

Something was different. Something had happened in our absence. Teheran was not the same. We all had the same impression, but at first were unable to trace its source. It was not the time of year, for the streets were no more dusty; nor was it the cars, although these seemed to have increased in number. It was not the police, now resplendent in white uniforms. It was something far more subtle—an almost imperceptible change, perhaps in the atmosphere. Puzzled, we looked around. Then we saw it. One, two, three, ten, twenty—an infinity of light-blue signs were to be seen outside almost every door in the town. In the centre was a round device of red, white and blue. Pepsi-Cola had come to Persia, and come to stay, by the look of things. Fourier-Aubry's dire prognostication had come one step nearer to its fulfilment across the Afghan frontier.

"Why Pepsi-Cola?" I asked later.

The answer had come in all seriousness. "Pepsi-Cola is a comparatively small company, so we allowed them in. We did not allow Coca-Cola in because they are a vast world-wide monopoly, and we do not wish Iran to be run by the Coca-Cola Company."

So Pepsi-Cola was now the fashion. It was served in the streets and in the smart cafés where previously tea would have been the rule. It was bought by the crate for the dances at the Park Hotel. It was drunk in the *sanctum sanctorum*, the Teheran Club, where staid and elderly gentlemen belonging to the upper crust of Persia and foreign society might be seen sipping it through straws. Even in the British Embassy the tell-tale bottles were to be found, hidden out of sight in the guard-house, or lying about in the garage. Teheran contrived to drink half a million bottles a week.

The Wrights had moved from the Embassy in town to the summer compound in Shimran, which lies some five miles from Teheran and two thousand feet above it. They welcomed us back and put two of us up: the other two disappeared to have a look at some of the other parts of Persia, taking the Land-Rover with them. Christopher and I remained to deal with the work required to get us across the rest of Asia and back to England.

Prime amongst our requirements were visas. We were going back through Baghdad and Damascus to Beirut and then north to Istanbul—for the sake of a change. Visas have to be obtained in reverse order: an Iraqi visa cannot be issued until a Syrian visa had been obtained, nor can a Syrian visa be issued until there is a stamp in the passport entitling one to enter the next country. The Lebanese could not issue a visa immediately, so we applied to the Syrians, telling them that we were going straight into Turkey. The Syrians would not believe that we did not need a visa for Turkey, but agreed to issue the visas after telephoning the Turkish Embassy. Forms were filled in, the signatures of the two absent members were hurriedly forged, and the passports left with the Consul for the week-end. Two days later, the virgin pages set aside for Syria still unviolated by any rubber stamp, we took the passports away in despair and gave them to the Iraqi Consul. He was amused at my making the elementary mistake of forging the signatures of everybody else in his presence, but he agreed

to stamp our passports nonetheless, provided that we could prove that we were not Jews, for, he said frankly, he did not like Jews, was not allowed to issue visas to them and would not do so if he could. We had to have an official certificate to the effect that we were not Jews before he could assist us in any way at all. Reflecting that two days had so far got us nowhere, I applied to the Consul in our own Embassy for the necessary certificate, which, against a payment of fourteen shillings, was duly drawn up, an impressive document. It worked wonders. The Iraqi Consul handed over the passports with their visas, a broad smile on his face. He could now be friends with us, for we had proved that, to the best of the knowledge of the British Consul himself, we were "neither of the Jewish race nor of the Jewish faith". I handed the passports to the Persian police and went back to Shimran.

The road from the upper compound to the town is one long slope, up and down which moves some heavy traffic. Taxis, even at their very low rates, were hardly an economical proposition when one was making several journeys between Shimran and Teheran every day, so we usually went by bus. The bus service runs frequently and is always crowded, whether the vehicle is a ramshackle old contraption built on to an American chassis or one of the new Mercedes-Benz buses from Germany. There are bus stops at intervals, where one may buy one's ticket, but which are otherwise stops in name only. The buses come hurtling downhill and apply their defective brakes only in time for them to stop a hundred yards away; the queue rushes down to the bus, which admits a few people, leaving the remainder in a disconsolate group. This group then becomes the official queue, and the bus will stop a hundred yards past it, when the process of rushing down to catch it will be repeated. One may cover a good quarter of a mile in this way before one gets on.

In due course, the others returned from a trip to the south, full of the beauties of Qum and Isfahan. The Wrights were thanked for our second very pleasant stay with them, and we

went down into the town for some last-minute carpet-buying before starting off. This took place in one of the shops which have a virtual monopoly over the best work, and, inevitably, the timeless ritual of bargaining was accompanied by sips of Pepsi-Cola. The carpet dealers were gradually forced down from the wide-eyed—

“Honest, I only make ten per cent on this,”
through—

“I let you have it at cost because it is a good carpet and you have good taste,”

and the exaggeratedly alarmed—

“How can I let you have it for less? You bargain so well that I am losing fifteen per cent,”

until the bargain was finally clinched at—

“I give you this carpet real cheap because I like you very much. I lose half what I paid, but we part friends,” at which point the naïf might proudly imagine that he had really paid less than the carpet was worth, whilst the cynical would reflect that although he had been roundly cheated, things might have been worse. Most of the carpet dealers were of a race which would have found little favour with the Iraqi Consul. Outside their shops there were men with charcoal grills set up on the pavement who were finding a ready sale for something or other with passers-by. We discovered that something or other was sheep’s genitals, lightly roasted and evidently being to the Teherani what a “hot-dog” is to an American.

* * * *

Coca-Cola, I mused as I stood in a street in Baghdad three days later, comes in a smaller bottle than Pepsi-Cola. Therefore it should represent slightly worse value. On the other hand, I am not sure that it has not just got the edge in flavour, I thought as I bought my fourth bottle. The street was deserted in the stifling heat of midday, deserted but for myself and the grinning Arab who had now sold me three bottles of one and

four of the other. Iced and delicious, if slightly inclined to remind one of its fate for some time after it had ceased to be enjoyed. . . . Beyond an embankment the Tigris flowed by, lukewarm and sluggish. A hot wind sent a cloud of dust swirling down the street like a rustling brown curtain. A piece of newspaper stirred restlessly in the gutter, uncertain whether to go or to stay, like a nervous guest at a party at which he knows nobody. The tarmac of the street was tacky underfoot. Everything was hot, except the contents of the bin from which my grinning angel fished another bottle of Pepsi-Cola. If in doubt, go for quantity.

I was standing a few hundred yards from the Syrian Embassy, where I had at last been successful in getting our visas. They had treated me very well; the Consul had given up his lunch-hour to our needs, and I had stayed whilst the others went to get a load of petrol which was waiting for us. Now I was waiting for them to return.

Our purchases of carpets completed, we had left Teheran and travelled along the edge of the Elburz mountains to Hamadan, then over the mountains of Kurdistan to Kermanshah. The trip had been pleasant, the roads not too bumpy, and the mountain scenery cool and a refreshing change from the desert. A winding and newly surfaced road led us over yet another pass and out at Khossrovi, our last Persian town, where we had waited for three hours in the early morning for the Customs house to open. The yard had been full of patiently waiting pilgrims, either on their way to Meshed or on their way out to Beirut, whence they would embark on a pilgrim ship to Jeddah and thence to Mecca. Several of the brightly coloured buses stood by idly. We noticed one Persian family which had as part of its luggage a coffin: they were taking a relation into Iraq to be buried. A sweetish smell came out of the coffin as it lay under the sun. The Customs insisted on opening it, as coffins are a convenient repository for contraband. The corpse was wrapped in five valuable carpets—evidently more than it deserved, for the family were taken

away for further interrogation. Then we were in Iraq, in this part a hilly desert with palm trees where there was water. Coca-Cola had been allowed into Iraq, and seemed to be displacing tea in popularity; Pepsi-Cola competed hotly. The road was now very good, leading over flattening country where we saw the Army, with their mixture of British and American equipment, manoeuvring. They looked very smart.

When we reached the part of the road which is low enough to be affected by the floods of the Tigris, we had turned off into the desert at a barrier, driving along a course which, a mile from the road, was, we hoped, roughly parallel to it. A short sandstorm forced us to stop for twenty minutes as it beat against the car: the stinging particles found their way everywhere, turning to slime on our bodies and later caking and flaking off. Then into Baghdad over a road rendered so uneven by the floods that all traffic had to slow down to walking pace and looked like shipping afloat in a force-ten gale as it ploughed its way over the billowing tarmac. Baghdad—a dreary, dusty, hot town, well laid out but hopelessly grim in aspect, where we were kindly looked after by the Rover agent, where we were given a contact with a Very Influential Personage in Beirut, where we could drink the water from the taps and where, at last, we got our Syrian visas. The others found me in the street finishing my fifth Pepsi-Cola and took me away.

We left Baghdad that evening, along er-Rashid street with its good hotels, across the Tigris and back on to the undulating tarmac. On our way out we caught a glimpse of the huge silvery shape of the famous Nairn bus which leaves for Damascus and Beirut every night. The Nairn bus company was started several decades ago by two Scottish brothers, and is said to have achieved the ultimate in land travel. They go by the ordinary road as far as the oasis of Rutba Wells, where they then turn off, in order to avoid the Jordan frontier, into the desert; this they cross with ease owing to the size of the wheels, and arrive punctually in Damascus the next day. The

bus consists of a large air-conditioned trailer which is towed by an enormous American diesel tug. Inside the trailer, apparently, is every comfort, including seats which turn into beds at night. The Nairn bus easily outdistanced us, seeming not to mind in the very least the unevenness of the road.

Our own choice was to follow the road which runs alongside the Iraq Petroleum Company's pipeline across the desert, as this road was tarmac and we had no wish to undergo the horrors of dirt and dust which a crossing from Rutba on an unsurfaced track would have involved. Perhaps we were getting soft, we reflected, as the black ribbon led on through the night, unending, across a rolling waste of sand. At Habbaniya, we crossed the Euphrates and got a glimpse of a finger-post reading LONDON 4,135 miles; then we were in Ramadi and, many hours later, Rutba Wells, a shanty-town, weird in the glare of its few lights. At hundred-mile intervals we passed the petrol company's pumping stations as the road led on, sand stretching away to either side as far as the light of the moon would allow one to see, an undulating, silvery-grey plain. Iraq became Jordan with nothing but a sign to tell one of the fact. Sixty miles farther on, in the cool dawn, a soldier of the Arab Legion stopped us and saw us through the Customs. The desert around became black and volcanic as we approached the Jebel-ed-Druz, the home of the fierce Druz tribesmen whose camels we could occasionally see in the distance. Mafrag and a few villages passed by as the day wore on until, unreasonably and unexpectedly, we were in Syria.

We were in Syria, but we still had not passed the Customs. For the first and only time in the whole trip, the car was searched. The guns were discovered, taken out and handed to a party of officer cadets who were standing round.

"You are not allowed to import guns into Syria," said the official.

"We are in transit. Can you not seal them up for us?" we asked.

"Guns are dangerous. Foreigners are not allowed to import guns. Only Syrians are allowed to have them. Have you any ammunition?" he asked hopefully. We handed over the ammunition, which was promptly and gleefully distributed to the cadets. The cadets then proceeded to prove that only Syrians were fit to have guns by firing in all directions at anything they saw. Bullets ricocheted off the walls, humming wickedly, until the Customs post began to resemble the Alamo in the heat of battle.

"We will await instructions as to the disposal of the guns . . ." said the official, raising his voice.

We made ready to go.

"... and you will stay here with them."

"I thought you were keeping the guns."

"We are not empowered to confiscate guns."

"Please confiscate the guns."

"We are not empowered . . ."

"*Please* confiscate the guns." We were almost on our knees.

"We . . ."

The remnant of our Jordan currency changed hands. The guns were taken from the protesting cadets and we were allowed to go.

A few more hours saw us through Damascus, and then we were in the Lebanon. A winding road climbed through thick woods with little, almost Alpine cottages in them. Hundreds of huge American cars poured past us. It was again dark, and their lights were one long stream as they headed towards Damascus or towards Beirut. We passed brightly lighted towns, where food was a phenomenal price, and which looked very modern and were almost Swiss in character. Then we were at the top, the Mediterranean below us, with Beirut like a softly twinkling handful of diamonds at its edge. The smell of the sea was perceptible as it mingled with that of the hills and the pinewoods upon them.

The next morning, we went to call on the Very Influential Personage in Beirut. We found the town to be a dream, a beautifully clean modern city, spacious and fine, with the waters of the sea of a blue colour that is normally only found on picture postcards. The Very Influential Personage had left a message: he would unfortunately not be able to see us that day, but he had detailed one of his assistants to see that during our stay in the Lebanon we should lack for nothing.

He meant it. A hesitant mention of the fact that all was not well in the car's gearbox set a team of a dozen mechanics on to tearing out its entrails with fierce growls. "A new gearbox will be fitted by two o'clock," said the assistant, whose name was Kemal. "The car will be washed, the roof-rack refitted, and the tank will be filled. All with the compliments of the Boss. Now for lunch."

We were taken to Beirut's most exclusive club in an enormous new Lincoln belonging to Kemal. He drove at high speed, disregarding all the signs. "It is a short-cut this way," he explained as he drove the wrong way down a one-way street at sixty-five. "If the police see me they will give me a ticket." He laughed self-deprecatingly. "They often give me tickets. There must be many in the station waiting for me. You see, I have a friend in the police. . . ."

"This old crate," he complained, treading the accelerator down to the floor, "is no good. You can't even steer it round corners"—he went round a corner on two wheels—"and it's only fit for cross-country work. This year I am rather poor, and I cannot afford a new car, but next year . . . ah, that will be when I get my Bentley Continental. . . ." He kissed his fingers ecstatically. "And I'll keep this crate for when I go shooting," he finished angrily as he stamped on the brakes.

"Do you smoke?" he asked, after an excellent luncheon. "Or have you got into the opium habit yet? There is plenty of opportunity for that here. We grow it, and it is one of the big reasons why Lebanese currency is as freely convertible as the Swiss franc. Of course, it is not legal—I won't actually

use the word illegal—to grow it here. We have to keep up good relations with our Syrian and Egyptian brothers, who get most of the hashish we produce. So from time to time the Government send up a few bulldozers to plough up the fields in which the opium poppies grow. The owners show them which fields to plough up, and the bulldozers set to work. They are shown exactly half the fields, and do not look for any others. So half the opium fields are left intact. The product is halved, but the price is doubled, so everybody is happy: the Syrians and Egyptians who want the opium so badly, the Government who have done their duty in attempting to stamp out this foul traffic, the growers whose income is the same with half the work, and the smugglers who transport the stuff across the frontiers with such courage and integrity."

Our twenty-four-hour tour of the Lebanon was completed that evening, leaving behind it an impression of a modern, flourishing, slightly corrupt and exceedingly rich community. After a prolonged bathe in the warm and milky water of the Lebanese coast, we found ourselves once more in Syria, and once more at the mercy of the Syrian Customs. Fortunately, they were friendly, being evidently much less busy than at the other post. We sat in a row in an office which was dimly lit by two lanterns. They did not take their job seriously.

"Qu'avez-vous à déclarer, messieurs?"

"Opium, hashish, guns, cigarettes."

"*Bien*. You may give us each a cigarette. *Entente cordiale* you understand. And your women? Where are they?"

"In England. We have no women with us—unfortunately."

"*Pouf*," the Customs men ejaculated, surprised, "*et pour quoi?*"

"We thought the police might not like it."

"*A bas la police*."

"*A bas la douane*," we said.

"*A bas les gouvernements*," they added, not to be outdone.

"*A bas les gouvernements*," we agreed, and on that note of amity re-entered Syria.

After a few hours' travel along the coast road, we drove on to the beach and camped down for the night. It was not to be a peaceful one. Barely had we turned out our lights when the night was made hideous by grunts of rage from John.

"You awful man," he seemed to be saying—perhaps those were not his actual words—"you jolly well leave me alone. I want to sleep." Staccato barks of Arabic were intermingled with his grunts. I went over to where he had set up his bed, to find it surrounded by a ring of bayonets, above each of which appeared a stubbly face. One of the men—they seemed to be soldiers—was busy with his bayonet trying to wrinkle John out of his sleeping-bag much as one tries to wrinkle the meat out of a lobster's claw. I found myself included in the circle of bayonets and the others soon joined us as they were prodded into wakefulness and marched over. Then we came to an impasse. We knew no Arabic. The N.C.O. in charge of the party knew only a little French: he restricted his use of that language to saying *merde* and *je m'en fous*. We were able to carry on a lively exchange using only these few words, but conversation soon dried up. We were marched over to a neighbouring farmhouse where we sat down in the ring of bayonets. Behind each bayonet, as the N.C.O. was at pains to show us, was a loaded rifle, pointing directly at us. The N.C.O. went for instructions to his headquarters and we settled down for an hour's wait. Soon, the humour of the situation began to glimmer on the horizon of our sleep-starved consciousness. Somehow, we found out the Arabic for good (*kuis*) and bad (*kharab*). We started a conversation to show the soldiers what we felt. A few locals wandered up.

"America—*kuis*," we said.

The soldiers nodded gravely, the movement shaking their bayonets so that the lamplight glinted on the burnished steel. "*Amrika cuis*," they agreed.

"France—*kuis*."

"*France kuis.*"

"*England—kuis.*"

"*Inglestan kuis.*"

"*Palestine, Israel—kuis.*" There was a pause.

"*Felastin kuis,*" they agreed hesitantly.

Then we delivered our most telling blow.

"*Syria—KHARAB,*" we said.

This went down very well. The soldiers laughed, shaking the stocks of their rifles in a way that set us all quivering. They saw the joke. "*Surieh KHARAB!*" they all joined in. By the time their officer had arrived they were all shouting it at the tops of their voices. They fell silent when their officer got out of his car. His approach to us was direct.

"Are you opium-smugglers from Lebanon?" he asked. We replied that we were not.

"Nor, I suppose, are you an Israeli landing-party come to attack the motherland." With a bored yawn he told us to return to the beach, where we might sleep in peace, secure in the fatherly protection of the Syrian Army. We returned to bed, shaking hands with everybody. They all assured us that Syria was the worst country in the world.

The next day we drove through a stinking little grey village and found that we were in Turkey. The grey stony mountains and green forests made a pleasant change, as did the possibility of reading the language at a glance, even if one could not understand it. We passed through the towns whose names brought such vivid memories of St Paul to mind, towns like Antioch and Tarsus and the rich Roman remains which lie between them. Then through the grim scenery of the Silician gates and up on to the Anatolian plateau—a bare bleak landscape with Lake Tuz glinting strangely on a flat horizon—through the very occasional villages, black and ugly, through Ankara again and on to the familiar road to Istanbul, where we spent our last night in Asia on a hill near a wood, and where we woke up to find ice once more crackling on our sleeping-bags.

A drive through a *mêlée* of rushing noisy trams finally ended and we were on the ferry crossing to Istanbul. Before us lay the town: the Galata Bridge, the Golden Horn, the port with its assorted shipping floating inconsequentially on the blue water, the row of stately palaces on the European shore of the Bosphorus and, dominating the scene, the Aya Sofia and the Blue Mosque.

A fleeting glimpse at the town itself, however, soon showed that something was wrong, and far more seriously wrong than had been the case in Teheran. Everywhere there were shops with rusty blinds drawn over their fronts, occasional petrol pumps damaged, and signs torn down. In Istiklal Street, the Bond Street of the Near East, every other shop seemed to be shut. Abdullah's, the restaurant famous for both its quality and its prices, was still open, but most of the other restaurants were either shut or had been badly damaged. The inside of the agency of an internationally known make of typewriters was in ruins, with men standing knee-deep in wrecked machinery. We found out that for once Press reports had been underplayed, due to a rigid censorship which had been clamped down the moment the riots—for riots there had been—had happened. About five days before our arrival, a bomb had been exploded in the Turkish Consulate at Salonika, and in reprisal for this act a mob had gone about Istanbul and Izmir destroying everything Greek, including shops, churches and even cemeteries. As the mob grew, the rioting became out of control, xenophobic tendencies took over, and the destruction spread with great thoroughness to all minority and foreign-owned concerns. The result was an abrupt imposition of martial law, which was still in force. We were glad to find out that our friends in B.P. had suffered no loss whatsoever.

In no time at all, it seemed, we were back in Greece, after having travelled through several divisions of the Turkish Army deployed near the road. The Greeks showed little of their previous animosity to us, exhibiting only a pained surprise when we told them where we came from.

"And you are still alive, and unharmed," they asked, "are not the Turks dreadful barbarians?" We could not agree. British soldiers were being murdered in Cyprus by Greeks whose two and a half millennia of civilization seemed to have left some traces of barbarism beneath. At the Yugoslav frontier, we were remembered by a guard who bleated happily: "*Odin—miekhaniku; odin—geografiyu; odin—yazyki; y drugoi—ekonomiyu.*" He was glad to see us back and gave us a throat-searing drink of slivovitz. As we were emptying our glasses, two Land-Rovers drew up, one painted dark blue and called Isis, the other light blue and called Granta. They were owned by a joint party from Oxford and Cambridge who were on their way to Singapore.

All our plans and all our routine had been based upon the assumption that it would not rain. Apart from an occasional few drops which had never been inconvenient, the assumption had been justified. Until now. Both the nights that we spent in Yugoslavia on the way back were ones of unrelieved discomfort. The tents were not unpacked, as we had lost the poles, so we slept out of doors and uncovered as had always been our wont. If it was raining hard, we went on until it stopped, if not, we camped, careless of the soaking. A cold wind drove the rain at us from the east in needle-sharp lengths of grey steel.

Fortunately, sunny Italy justified the epithet. The hills above Trieste were warm and dry, and the Italians warm, interested and friendly. It was quite useless to tell them that we came from Afghanistan: no one had any idea of where that was. Persia evoked an equally vague response, so we took to telling them that we came from a place "near India". This worked very well and produced a suitable impression, until in Vicenza one woman asked whether, since we came from India, we knew Mr Gupta. She had been his mistress when he was in Italy during the war, she went on. Everybody knew Mr Gupta in Vicenza, and we must have met him. "Not Harry Gupta?" we asked, having met someone of that name. "Not

Enrico?" No, no, the woman said, he was called Willy, *Guglielmo*. Surely we had met him? Ah well, she said shrugging her shoulders, *non fa niente*. There would be plenty more cars from India, and someone would surely know. She badly wanted to see him. Even now, she could remember one night, ten whole years ago, though it seemed but yesterday, when she and Mr Gupta. . . .

The demoniac hooting of the Italian drivers was succeeded by an unnatural quiet on the coast of the south of France. B.P. stickers reading "*Energol, l'huile cinq fois raffinée*" and "The OILIEST oil" were once more obstructing our view through the windows. Menton, Monte Carlo, Nice and Cannes dropped behind us, their palmy beauty emphasized by the cerulean sea. Then up the valley of the Rhône—the car, in spite of its ordeal, still well able to do sixty-five miles an hour—and into Paris. A call on our friends in B.P.'s office resulted in an invitation to luncheon in Montmartre. . . . Late that afternoon, a gaping crowd of French reporters saw a well-wined Christopher driving the Brute up the steeply-inclined steps of the Sacré-Cœur. As an angry fried egg of a sun set in a raw beefsteak sky the next evening, we were winging our way across the Channel once more, the Brute safely ensconced in the hold of the aeroplane. Twenty-eight minutes later, with an imperceptible jolt, the wheels were in contact with English soil. It was raining.

We emerged from the murky gloom of the Customs shed, chastened by the stern attitude of officialdom. A man reminded us to drive on the left. This was no hardship, we reflected, for we had never been driving on the right, and to continue our habit of driving in the middle was the safest course. Water dripping down our necks damped our elation. Endless rows of identical houses damped it further. "What now?" we thought. A pub seemed to provide the answer.

The darkness outside was a welcome change from the bright warmth of the pub where we had been treated to the hostile stares of the regular customers and, like frightened

rabbits making for the safety of their burrow, we headed for the Brute, the only friendly thing in a country suddenly gone alien.

A tall, dark figure loomed up in the drizzle. "Look at the p'liceman with the funny hat," someone whispered dispiritedly. The policeman, intent on Duty, did not hear. He went straight to the point.

"This your car, Sir?"

"Yes." The question *had* been asked before, we recalled.

"'M." Then, apparently irrelevantly, and in tones of surprise, "It's dark."

"Yes."

"Your lights aren't on," he said mournfully, like a teacher who has discovered a comic concealed inside the atlas which his favourite pupil had appeared to be studying.

"Oh, Lord. Sorry, officer. You see, we've just come back from Afghanistan, and . . ."

"I don't care if you come from Aberdeen, Sir. Must have your lights on after dark. That is the law." He paused impressively. "Now, may I have your driving licence, your insurance certificate, your name and your address, please?"

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